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**The Galatians' Proposed Regression, Arousing
Anxiety in Paul That His Labor Toward Them
Might Turn Out to Be Empty and Useless
Galatians 4:8–11**

8 Howbeit at that time, not knowing God, ye were in bondage to them that by nature are no gods: **9** but now that ye have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how turn ye back again to the weak and beggarly rudiments [Or, *elements*], whereunto ye desire to be in bondage over again? **10** Ye observe days, and months, and seasons, and years. **11** I am afraid of you, lest by any means I have bestowed labor upon you in vain.

“But then,” says Paul, referring to the time implied in verse 7 when they had been slaves, “not knowing God, you were enslaved to them that by nature are no gods” (v. 8). At that time they did not know the true God, and so their enslavement to false gods who had no real existence was at least understandable.

But it is certainly different now: “but now that you have come to know God, or even more than that, to be known by God, how turn you back again upon the weak and impoverished rudiments, to which you wish to be enslaved again?” (v. 9).

How? asks Paul, expressing surprise, perhaps amazement (cf. 1:6). How is such a thing possible? (cf. BDAG, 900f on *pos*; similarly GT, 559). The desire for such slavery might perhaps be understandable back in the days when they did not know God and did not know anything better than enslavement to idolatry. But now they had come to know God, and even more than that, to be known by God. God had always known them intellectually or mentally, of course. But here *to know* is used in the sense *to recognize or acknowledge*, as in Amos 3:2, Matthew 7:23, and many other such passages. God had acknowledged them as his sons and had sent the Spirit of his Son into their hearts moving them to cry out to him as their Father. How is it possible that they would desire to relapse into an enslavement to weak and impoverished rudiments after experiencing so much? How can such a mystery be explained? There is no rational explanation for such behavior.

Recall the use of the word *rudiments* in verse 3. They were *weak*, powerless to accomplish liberation and justification; and they were *impoverished*, having nothing of the wealth which had been experienced by means of the gospel of grace.

But how is it possible that Paul speaks of a return to bondage, when they had not been under the law, but in pagan idolatry, and now were being seduced to accept the Mosaic law? It is because both systems had characteristics in common. Both were characterized by rudimentary knowledge and understanding such as is suited to children. In this way they were alike. So those who had been enslaved to one rudimentary system can be said to *return* to the weak and impoverished rudiments, though the system now being considered had a different form than the one from which they had escaped.

What was the evidence that they wanted to be in bondage again to the weak and beggarly rudiments? “Ye observe days, and months, and seasons, and years” (v. 10). The reference is to the various sacred days and seasons of the Mosaic law (cf. Col. 2:16). Not that they had observed all these as yet, for not enough time is likely to have elapsed for them to have observed a sacred year such as the year of jubilee. But they were beginning to observe these things, and so were manifesting a commitment to the system. Lenski points out that this verse is important as showing just how far the Galatians had gone, and perhaps also the extent to which the Judaizers had not succeeded

as yet. It is not likely that the Galatians had accepted circumcision as yet, for otherwise it would likely have stood at the top of Paul's list of evidences (cf. 5:2f).

Paul expresses his own anxiety about the Galatians in verse 11: "I am afraid of you, ..." For the verb *to fear* (Grk *phobeo*) with a direct object (*I fear you*), recall 2:12 where Peter was said to have feared "them that were of the circumcision." But there are many such cases, including passages such as Matthew 14:5, 21:26, 46, which speak of fearing the crowd, with the reason given. For what reason did Paul fear the Galatians? "... lest by any means I have labored for you in vain." The verb *kopiao* implies hard work, wearisome toil (GT, 355; BDAG, 558). Paul was afraid all his hard work for the Galatians would be *eike*, "to no purpose," "without success or result" (BDAG, 281), "without success or effect" (GT, 174). Cf. 3:4, and also First Thess. 3:5, though the Greek is different in the latter.

If the Galatians, having escaped one bondage (v. 8), should after all relapse into another (v. 9), certainly Paul's hard work for them would have turned out to be pretty fruitless. He would seem to have wasted his time and effort on them.

**The Christian Way of Life: Correct Understanding
of the Freedom in Christ
Galatians 5:13 – 6:10**

13 For ye, brethren, were called for freedom; only *use* not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh, but through love be servants one to another. **14** For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself [Lev. 19. 18]. **15** But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another. **16** But I say, walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. **17** For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary the one to the other; that ye may not do the things that ye would. **18** But if ye are led by the Spirit, ye are not under the law. **19** Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are *these*: fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, **20** idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousies, wraths, factions, divisions, parties [Gr. *heresies*], **21** envyings, drunkenness, revellings, and such like; of which I forewarn you [Or, *tell you plainly*], even as I did forewarn you [Or, *tell you plainly*], that they who practise such things

shall not inherit the kingdom of God. **22** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** meekness, self-control; against such there is no law. **24** And they that are of Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with the passions and the lusts thereof. **25** If we live by the Spirit, by the Spirit let us also walk. **26** Let us not become vainglorious, provoking [Or, *challenging*] one another, envying one another.

From Galatians 5:13–6:10 Paul explains how freedom in Christ is to be understood and applied. If all of Paul’s talk about freedom has made us nervous, it should not have. Just be patient and hear him out on this subject. His explanation of freedom in Christ will get us over our fears. For the life in Christ elevates Christians to an ethical peak that could not possibly be attained by the bondage of law. This passage is linked to the preceding by the conjunction “For” (Grk *gar*). But immediately after citing a reason for his strong language about the Judaizing teachers, he goes on to explain how the new freedom is to be used.

The emphasis up to now has been on that from which Christians have been liberated. But what then determines the Christian way of life? Does freedom in Christ mean that we are absolutely free, have no moral direction, are given license to choose our own way of life?

Remember that Paul’s doctrine of justification by the free grace of God was represented by opponents as tantamount to saying we may do evil that good may come (Romans 3:8), sin that grace may abound (Romans 6:1), that “all things are lawful” (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). So in an epistle that lays such stress on freedom, it is essential to address the question of how a Christian who has been made free from the law should conduct himself. If his conduct is not determined by the law, what does provide the pattern for daily life? In the section from 5:13–6:10 Paul reasons “that the call to freedom was a call not merely *from* the older enslavement, but also a call *to* a new responsibility.” A freedom that does not have both aspects is not the freedom to which God calls us (Dunn). It is not enough to discuss freedom *from* what. We must also ask: Freedom *for* what? If we do not, then we may well take up the dangerous position of those ungodly men who turn the grace of God into lasciviousness (Jude 4). But first, the reason for Paul’s wish concerning the Judaizers: “For you, Brethren, were called for freedom” (13a). While most experts would agree with BDAG, 366

(and GT, 233) that the Greek preposition *epi* here indicates “object or purpose,” its most literal meaning is *upon*—hence on the ground or basis of freedom. For similar applications of this preposition consult Ephesians 2:10, First Thess. 4:7, and perhaps Philippians 4:10 and Second Tim. 2:14. Freedom was the ground on which they were called, and hence the object or purpose for which they were called.

You is emphatic in the Greek. Whatever may be true of others, *you* were called for freedom.

The Right Use of Freedom (13–15)

A caution is sounded: “only do not let freedom become an occasion for the flesh” (13b).

The Greek *aphorme* is literally “a place from which a movement or attack is made, a base of operations,” and then “metaphorically that by which endeavor is excited and from which it goes forth; that which gives occasion and supplies matter for an undertaking, the incentive; the resources we avail ourselves of in attempting or performing anything” (GT, 90).

Or as put in BDAG, 158: “literally a base or circumstance from which other action becomes possible, such as the starting-point or base of operations for an expedition, then generally the resources needed to carry through an undertaking (e. g. even commercial capital), in our literature a set of convenient circumstances for carrying out some purpose, *occasion, opportunity* for something, a meaning found in Attic Greek and also quite common in the Koine.”

The word *flesh* can simply refer to human nature without moral implications (John 1:14). But in such passages as this, in which the flesh is opposed to the Spirit and the divine (vv. 16–24), the flesh is what man is apart from God and without divine influence. GT provides a good summary: “*sarx*, when either expressly or tacitly opposed to *to pneuma (tou theou)* [the Spirit of God, lam], has an ethical sense and denotes *mere human nature, the earthly nature of man apart from divine influence, and therefore prone to sin and opposed to God*; accordingly it includes whatever in the soul is weak, low, debased, tending to ungodliness and vice.” See further discussion in GT, 571. In this context, verses 15 and 19–21 provide illustration of the tendencies of the flesh in this sense.

So the freedom of which Paul speaks is not a license, occasion,

opportunity or base of operations to be used by weak and sinful humanity to do as it pleases.

That is the negative aspect of Paul's explanation of freedom. The alternative, positive aspect is spelled out in the rest of the sentence: "but through love serve one another as a slave." The word love is preceded by the Greek article, hence *the love*, thus recalling what Paul had said about the thing that has power or strength in Christ Jesus: "faith manifesting its energy through love" (v. 6). Paul is illustrating how the energy of faith is manifested through love.

A slave (Grk *doulos*) in the metaphorical sense is "one who gives himself up wholly to another's will" (GT, 158). Now to be sure, Christians are not slaves of men, as though committed to perform their will. We are slaves of God and Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 2:16). We are committed to the will of God as it is manifested through Christ. But we exercise that will by performing acts of service toward each other. That is the way freedom is to be exercised.

But this explanation of the Christian way of life reaches not only back to 5:6, but even back to Paul's summary of his own life unto God in 2:20. "It is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me," and the present life in the flesh is lived in the faith in the Son of God "who loved me and gave himself up for me." This description of the Christ is significant. It is that Christ who is the Son of God, "who loved me and gave himself up for me," who lives in a Christian by faith. Then the next such reference is 5:6, where Paul says that the thing which has strength in Christ Jesus is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, "but faith manifesting its energy through love." Now he takes the thought one step further when he explains how the freedom in Christ is exercised: "through love serve one another as slaves" (5:13). In that way the crucified Son of God lives in a Christian. That is the alternative to the bondage of law, and elevates a Christian far above the reach of law. But the law, which teaches us how to love each other, is not neglected, but fulfilled.

This is the point Paul makes as he elaborates in verse 14: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, (i.e.) in this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Paul makes the same point at Romans 13:8–10, but with some commentary. Every prohibition of the law is summed up in the command to love one's neighbor as himself. "Love works no ill to his neighbor: love therefore is the fulfillment of the law."

The reason goes back to Jesus and his reply to a question about the greatest commandment in the law. He cites the command to love God as “the great and first commandment,” and the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself as a second that is like the first, and then concludes: “On these two commandments the whole law hangs, and the prophets” (Matt. 22:34–40). Then consult Matthew 7:12 for commentary on “as thyself.”

I do not know why the first commandment to love God is omitted in such passages as Romans 13:8–10 and Galatians 5:14. Perhaps it is taken for granted as being involved in the command to love one’s neighbor. Perhaps it is because love for God is shown by loving one’s neighbor.

In any case, when Christ lives in a person and this indwelling is manifested by the same love that Christ had for us (2:20; 5:6; 5:13), though one is not under the law, nothing of the ethics of the law is missed. One is free from the bondage to the law, and yet the whole law is fulfilled.

When one acts out of love he seeks to do good for others, to help others and to build them up. The alternative is to endeavor to destroy others or to tear them down: “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out lest you be consumed one by the other” (v. 15). This metaphorical use of the Greek *dakno* (bite) is explained by GT, 124 thus: “to wound the soul, cut, lacerate, rend with reproaches” and by BDAG, 210: “to cause discomfort to” or “harm.”

Grk *katethio* (devour) is here “to ruin (by the infliction of injuries)” (GT, 339); or “to engage in spiteful partisan strife: between *dakno* and *analisko* [consume], something like *tear to pieces*” (BDAG, 532).

Grk *analisko* is “to do away with something completely by using up, destroy, consume” (BDAG, 67; cf. GT, 39); used of the effect of fire in Luke 9:54.

We speak of “character assassination,” and are familiar with the way people can be destroyed by the use of words. Consider also our use of the term “backbiting.” Think also of the way one can set out to destroy a person in controversy, instead of reasoning over issues.

Exodus 21:2–6 may provide an illustration of the way the Christian life works. A Hebrew slave could be kept in bondage for six years, but was to go free in the seventh year. However, the slave may choose to remain in bondage, in which case the bondage was made permanent.

The Christian life is something like that. Realizing the great benefit Christ Jesus has been to him, a person voluntarily commits himself to serve this benevolent Master for as long as he lives. He realizes that servitude to this Master is better for him than any other life he could have. So he chooses to be the slave of that Master who loved him and gave up his life for him (again 2:20).