

# Preferring Bondage to Grace

*Galatians 4:8-11*

*With Study Questions*

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**But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. <sup>9</sup> But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how *is it that* you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? <sup>10</sup> You observe days and months and seasons and years. <sup>11</sup> I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain (Galatians 4:8-11).**

## **Estranged from God**

**But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods (Galatians 4:8).**

Although this message is primarily aimed at Christians who are being tempted to wander from the faith, we see a description in verse eight of all men exterior to the faith. Paul teaches man's condition is that of ignorance of his Creator.

This fact should be disquieting. I once wedded two atheists. As we discussed the ceremony, they informed me of their desire to have certain religious trappings within the service; I respectfully declined from allowing these trappings, not wishing to contribute to hypocrisy. They didn't believe in God, why give Him a false salute? Vacuous looks subdued their faces when they realized that God simply was not invited to be part of the ceremony.

Not all would respond in this manner, be that as it may, to be estranged from one's Creator is the nadir (rock bottom) of emptiness. A sensory deprivation chamber may seem relaxing for a time – no sound, no touch, no taste. But in time the solitude would drive one to madness. This would truly be preferable to the black darkness of one deprived of the knowledge of God – a soul floating in emptiness! And to push the matter further, this eternal deprivation of God – the horror that it is – would be preferable to an eternity of God's wrath.

May God grant men an inkling of this truth, lest they spend their lives in a state of self-delusion and ignorance, followed by an eternity of torment.

## **Culpable for Ignorance?**

It would be fair to ask why man is culpable (responsible) before God for his ignorance of God. Why should unbelief be considered man's first and final act of rebellion? It is because man's ignorance of God is by his own choosing – his own free will. Paul reveals the psyche of man:

**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,<sup>19</sup> because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,<sup>21</sup> because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.<sup>22</sup> Professing to be wise, they became fools,<sup>23</sup> and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things (Romans 1:18-23).**

### **Not Full Ignorance**

A brief examination of the passage reveals that man's ignorance of God is not a full ignorance. There is very much an awareness in the mind of every man that there is a God to whom man is accountable. I may know I have a neighbor and even know a great many things about him. But if I am not inclined to visit him and sup with him I cannot truly say I know him.

Furthermore, if I were to selfishly decide that I didn't want the responsibility of being a neighbor, and suppressed my knowledge of my neighbor to the point where I had somehow convinced myself that I have no neighbor, that self-delusion does not cause the evaporation of my neighbor.

### **Heart Problem**

We learn this to be the condition of every man; he knows there is a God yet suppresses that truth in unrighteousness. Although they know there is a God, they choose not to acknowledge Him as God. Paul gives the order of this ignorance in Ephesians where he writes,

**...being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart (Ephesians 4:18).**

They are darkened in their understanding and excluded from the life of God because of ignorance due to hardness of heart. In other words, it is not an intellectual problem men have. Men aren't culpable before God simply because they aren't smart enough to figure things out.

## Not Discursive

Paul's argument from Romans is not a discursive argument. He is not saying that there is a creation and if we apply our minds to the source, purpose, or being of that creation, the sharp thinker will deduce the necessity of the existence of God. In verse nineteen Paul teaches us that God doesn't merely show it to men, He manifests (makes apparent) it in men. Every man knows there is a God and is therefore inexcusable before that God.

## Worshipping the Corruptible

To make matters worse, men supplant God with worship of that which is corruptible. In the verse under our examination Paul reminds his readers that they used to serve **"those which by nature are not gods."**

Paul taught in Romans 1:23 that this is the natural course of action for the mind which is at enmity (hostility) with God. The gentiles had their "dumb idols" (1 Corinthians 12:1, 2), and the Jews had turned God's Mosaic economy from a fountain of truth and grace into a carcass of dead works.

## Religious and A-religious Idolatry

In all this we learn that men are willfully ignorant of God and choose to worship that which is more acceptable to the inclinations of their own depraved nature. This can happen within the context of pagan kings who wish to cut the fetters of responsibility before God (Psalm 2) or it can happen within the context of a religious society who chooses to mold their God into a strong, but ignorant, bull-calf who will do their bidding without question (Exodus 32).

**But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? <sup>10</sup> You observe days and months and seasons and years (Galatians 4:9, 10).**

Here, as in untold numbers of Scripture, we are informed as to how men's ignorance of God is overcome. We no longer worship false gods; now we know God. Paul is quick, however, to give the true design of the relationship; it is not so much that we know Him, but that He knows us. The adage is "it's not what you know but who you know." The deeper issue is, "who is willing to admit they know you?"

We ignore the neighbor and suppress his very existence. But this omnibenevolent neighbor rescues us from our folly and our desire to worship the creature rather than the Creator. He strikes up the relationship and irresistibly wins our calcified hearts.

There has always been, within and without the church, an extolling (praise) of the will of man, however we find that man merely exercises his will in rebellion against his good and gracious Creator. The wise man instead extols the will of God for his knowledge of his sovereign Master. As the Master Himself taught,

**All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and *the one* to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him* (Matthew 11:27).**

Calvin put it nicely:

**Paul reminds the Galatians whence they had derived the knowledge of God. He affirms that they did not obtain it by their own exertions, by the acuteness or industry of their own minds, but because, when they were at the farthest possible remove from thinking of him, God visited them in his mercy. What is said of the Galatians may be extended to all; for in all are fulfilled the words of Isaiah, "*I am sought by them that asked not for me: I am found by them that sought me not.*" (Isaiah 65:1.)**

### **Preferring Bondage**

Herein lies the quandary. Having been so graciously delivered from bondage and darkness "**how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?**" Startling it is that one would even consider walking away from such grace! Yet this is a recurring theme in the Holy Text. Hence we read in Proverbs that which Peter refers to as false apostles in the church.

**But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "*A dog returns to his own vomit,*" and, "*a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire*" (2 Peter 2:22).**

Dare we speculate as to why one would prefer bondage to grace? Perhaps it is because bondage offers a false enlightenment. The proposition is "You will be as God" (Genesis 3:4). Is not a little bondage worth the risk?

## **A Warning for the Church**

But certainly the church is not under the threat of such risk! The church could never find itself under the curse of unbelief and bondage! Why then, we must ask, would Paul write this letter to churches?

The letter is written to the churches of Galatia (and to you and to me) because in the same way, by God's grace, we were saved through the gospel, it is the gospel and its attending warnings which sustain us now; here we see yet another argument for the continued preaching of law and gospel.

## **Approval in Ceremonies?**

Paul laments, "do you really think you will find approval before God by your observance of days, months, seasons and years? Keep them well for your very soul depends upon a precisioned adherence in thought word and deed. One ill deed, one stray thought, one thoughtless word and your soul is lost!"

It is no wonder (though perhaps rhetorical) Paul questions his ministerial efforts with these churches.

**I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain  
(Galatians 4:11).**

A church devoid of law and gospel, a church which has lost the message of justification by faith alone, though full of programs and talk of God and obedience and personal sacrifice, becomes a church of vanity (emptiness; meaninglessness).

Perhaps the Jews and gentiles alike missed the pomp of their former systems of worship. The difficult and illustrious nature of the priesthood had been replaced by home-churches and the simplicity of the Lord's Supper. Who, observing the shenanigans of the papal palace, wouldn't be tempted to think that God must be lingering among the hats, robes, gesticulations, and hand signals?

Is it no wonder that God destroyed the temptation of the temple? As Jesus foretold, there is not one stone upon another, nor will that man-made temple ever be rebuilt to the glory of God. The New Testament speaks only of one re-built temple – the temple of the body of Christ (John 2:19-21).

Let us not be tempted by the false glitter and trappings of ceremonial emptiness or the un-kept promises of moral and psychological autonomy. Let us rather feed upon the simple yet profound elements which house the spiritual presence of the living Savior. Let us heed Paul's warning, a warning uttered centuries earlier by the prophet Jeremiah:

**“Be astonished, O heavens, at this, And be horribly afraid; Be very desolate,” says the Lord.<sup>13</sup> “For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, *And* hewn themselves cisterns – broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:12, 13).**

Let us now proceed to the fountain.

## Questions for Study

1. What is man's natural estate concerning his relationship with God (page 1)?
2. Why should this estate be bothersome (page 1)?
3. Why is man culpable for his ignorance of God (pages 2)?
4. Does man's problem with God concern intellect or heart (page 2)?
5. Discuss why God's revelation of Himself is not discursive (page 3).
6. When men reject God, will they no have no god at all (page 3)?
7. Why do you suppose Paul tells us we are known by God (pages 3, 4)?
8. Who initially "wills" that men be saved (page 4)?
9. What is the quandary that Paul is dealing with concerning the Galatians (page 5)?
10. Why do you suppose people might be tempted to walk away from grace (page 5)?
11. What is the value of warning the church against turning away from God (page 5)?
12. What was Paul's fear (page 5)?
13. Discuss the temptations of highly ceremonial, yet false, religions (page 5).