

Galatians 4:8-31

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 December 2025

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Turn, if you will, to Galatians chapter 4. So if you have a black church Bible, it's page 974. And if you want to grab one, they're just by the door. If you've come wanting a Christmas sermon, you're going to be very, very disappointed.

But we're in Galatians, and I need to get to the end of Galatians by the end of January, and I'm struggling to get out of Galatians. So I think I've got something, well, I have got something to say tonight, and it'll be a good sermon, I hope, for the end of the year.

Galatians is pretty lively, isn't it? It's pretty fiery. And the Apostle Paul is giving a biblical and a theological argument, step by step by step.

And what you find with the Apostle Paul is his logic is unanswerable. Relentlessly logical. And I think, very often, when we think of the Apostle Paul, we think of this kind of cerebral, stern, logical man, and we can ask the question, does anything get beyond his mind and reason?

People might ask that of churches like ours. Do they feel anything? Seem like stones sometimes. The Apostle Paul, did anything move him?

[1 : 14] Did he feel? Well, look with me at verses 8 to 20. Look at verse 11. There he's saying this, I'm afraid about you. He's saying to the church in Galatia, I'm afraid that my whole work amongst you has gone down the drain.

Verses 15 to 16, he's saying, I'm disappointed in you. I'm really disappointed in you. I've told you the truth, and now you see me as your enemy.

And in verse 19, he says, it's as if I'm like a mother suffering birth pains. And I've not suffered birth pains, but neither is the Apostle Paul. But there's certainly feeling, isn't there, in birth pains.

He says, I'm like a mother suffering birth pains. And he ensures his aim until Christ is formed in you. He says, I'm in agony. I'm like an apostle with birth pains.

That's what he felt for the Galatian Christians on three things tonight. As he speaks to them, he says to the church in Galatia, do not forfeit the freedom of Christ.

[2 : 21] Don't forfeit the freedom of Christ. He begins by saying, before you came to know the Lord Jesus Christ, you were in bondage.

You were in chains. You were enslaved. It was the bondage of paganism. And he's saying that not knowing God isn't actually freedom. It is slavery.

When you didn't know God, you weren't slaves. And that's what they were in their paganism and their idols. And then he says, that changed, didn't it? You came to the Lord Jesus Christ and you've had a taste of freedom.

Verse nine, when you came to know God. And then he corrects himself. And he says, when you came to know God, or rather, when you came to be known by God.

He's saying, you came to know God, but the fact that you came to know God was not because of something that you did. It was not because of an action that you did, but you were known by God first.

[3 : 26] And that is why you came to know God. That's true, isn't it? It's always his initiative that comes first. You came to know God.

And that is freedom and wonderful, but it is an even more wonderful thing to be known by God. It is God's initiative. You love God because he first loved you. But he said to the Galatians, you've known that freedom.

You've known a taste of freedom. And you've known a genuine, living relationship with God. And you are known by him.

But now you are regressing back into bondage. He says in verses 9 and 10, how is that? How is it that you're turning your back on freedom?

How is it that you're turning back to the weak and powerless, elementary principles of the world? Why is it having a taste of freedom you want to go back into slavery?

[4 : 28] You're observing days and months and seasons and years. Why are you going back to bondage? And so what's going on? What are these days and months and seasons and years?

They are days of special celebration in the Jewish calendar. Holidays, Jewish religious festivals. Some of them were Sabbaths, but then there were months.

Every new month, there was a new moon festival at the start of each month. Seasons would be more prolonged festivals like perhaps Pentecost or the Feast of Tabernacles.

Some of the feasts and the years, the year of Jubilee. And they were commemorated throughout the Jewish calendar. And these teachers who've come to Galatia, they're invading the church and they're saying to these new believers, if you really want to be part of the people of God, if you really want to belong and to know God, you've got to keep the Jewish observances.

Paul is not anti-Jew. He was one. He wasn't against observances as such. As long as they were an expression, a voluntary expression.

[5 : 38] But what he was upset by was these teachers were saying, this is essential. That if you want to be one of the people of God, you've got to keep these observances. That they try to impose on the Galatians as necessary to salvation.

He is saying, it's not like the paganism you've come from in one sense, but it is the same bondage. It is the same principle in thinking that outward observance is what really matters.

It's a form of legalism. As if by doing, keeping certain days, that is going to claim you credit with God. I wonder how, whether you realise how barren that is.

I'm John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, the kind of great 18th century preacher. In his early days, he graduated from Oxford University. And he and his friends formed something like a holy club.

Well, that's what it was called. Wesley was the son of a clergyman. And John himself was already ordained. He was quite sound and orthodox in his belief. He was religious in his practice.

[6 : 45] He was upright in his conduct. He was moral. He was full, overflowing of good works. He and his friends visited inmates in the prison and workhouses around Oxford.

John Wesley took pity on slum children. He provided them with food and clothing and education. In the holy club, they not only observed the Sabbath, but they observed Saturday as all hell. They went to church.

They had holy communion. They gave alms. They searched the scripture. They did lots of Bible studies. They fasted. They prayed. But they were enslaved by the shackles of religion.

And they were trusting in their religious observances and their procedures and not in Jesus Christ alone. And that is barren.

That is a dead end street. When you are trusting in that stuff, it is barren and it is a dead end. Can you see the difference here? Freedom, Paul says, is knowing God and being known by him.

[7 : 58] Bondages, you observe days and months and seasons and years. There is a difference. There is all the world of difference between having a genuine relationship with God and keeping external religious observances.

You can carefully be in church and keep the days and keep the seasons and keep the months and keep the years and not know God at all. 25 years ago, we just got married and we went to Northern Ireland for Christmas.

I was running a youth group and the youth group gave me a present for Christmas and they said, don't open it until you get to Northern Ireland. We were getting the earliest flight from Newton Airport a couple of days before Christmas and we arrived at Newton Airport.

It was absolutely rammed, easy jet, overbooking flights and all that, absolutely packed. We put our bag through the security and the security alarm went off and started flashing.

our bag went through. They took our bag away. They took it to the side. He looked at me and he said, you've got a gun in your bag.

[9 : 15] I said to him, I've got a gun in my bag. He said, you've got a gun in your bag. Two other men arrived. The bag is there. They say, you've got a gun in your bag.

I said, I haven't got a gun in my bag. I haven't got a gun. They opened it up very, very carefully and there in the wrapping paper is a potato gun from the young people.

I could have killed them. I could have absolutely killed them. On the x-ray, it looked like a real gun. On the x-ray, you look at it and you say, you've got a gun in your bag but it wasn't a proper gun. It wasn't a real gun. There was the shape and there was the form but there was no reality. And religious practice, even tonight, even coming to church on the last, on graveyard Sunday, Sunday night, it can look real but there'd be no reality to it.

And we need to be very careful as a church. Do I really know the freedom of being known by God? The reality of a relationship of really knowing God.

[10:29] We can say that. Or am I caught up in the practice of religion? Why is it that formal religiosity, if I put it like that, is so attractive to some people?

Well, for one thing, it's flattering, isn't it? Because we think to ourselves, if I can throw myself into religious observance, then it probably earns me credit with God.

God will see how much I'm doing for him. But I think I can do something to earn God's favour. But it's also safe, isn't it?

There are some people out there, maybe you tonight, and you are afraid of the language of an intimate relationship with God. You don't want God to get too close to you.

And religious observances and practices and formal kind of occasions provide just the right form of structured insulation to keep us away from meeting with the living God.

[11:36] And we have to be careful, don't we, and examine ourselves. Do I know tonight, at the end of this year, the freedom of knowing God, or more accurately and more wonderfully, of being known by him?

Or am I merely practising religion? Secondly, Paul appeals to the church, don't forfeit the freedom of Christ, but he says to them, hold on to the truth of Christ. That's verses 12 to 16. He goes back in his memory and he says, can't you remember, don't you remember how you first received me?

When I came to Galatia, don't you remember? The reason I came was because of a bodily ailment. I was unwell. That's how I preached the gospel first to you. What does he mean by that?

What is this bodily ailment? We don't know. It was some physical condition that he had. It may well have been because he was persecuted. That had bloodied him and disfigured him.

The Apostle Paul wasn't an attractive guy at all. Or it could be that there's something physical that he suffers with that's alluded to in 2 Corinthians 12 with a thorn in the flesh. We know that there's loads of different views on this.

[12:47] Did Paul have problems with his eyes? Did he have a squint? There's all sorts of theories out there. No one knows. But Paul says here in verses 13 and 14 that although my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn me or despise me.

The word literally there is you did not spit at me. There was something about my physical condition that was repulsive to you. But in spite of that, you received me.

How did they receive him? As an angel of God. It's a beautiful description of a preacher. As an angel of God, a messenger of God, as though I were Christ, Jesus himself.

And you held on to the truth of the gospel that I brought to you and you were not turned off and you were not discouraged because of the package in which it came. Because the package in which the gospel came to Galatia was not very attractive, was it?

And we live in a culture, don't we, that values the packaging more than what's in the package. Where appearance really matters. Where personality really matters.

[14:00] You think of advertising. You think of the popular people in our culture. You think of the social commentators.

It's very rare there's a bald one, isn't there? Bald men get a very, very hard time in our culture.

There'll never be another bald prime minister or president because the packaging matters, doesn't it?

The packaging matters. The church can begin to operate that way. Be very anti-bold men. There's very few bald men are asked to speak at conferences. I'm kidding, alright? But we look for the minister, don't we, who's omniscient, socially adept, an executive, somebody who gives off positivity.

And if the truth of the gospel relies primarily on personality and packaging, well, oftentimes it would not be accepted because Jesus Christ does not use smooth operators.

Let me give you, I've given this illustration this year at the lunchtime talk. I've given it every other year on a Sunday but I don't think I've given it this year on a Sunday. It's the testimony of Charles

Hamilton Spurgeon. Alright? I love the story.

[15:08] He's 15 years old. Spurgeon says, I was thinking about salvation one day. He was exercised about his soul. He realised there was a God in heaven he wasn't right with.

And one Sunday morning he goes to a particular chapel. He wants to go to one particular church and congregation but it's snowing so hard that it forced him to turn down a side street and go into a primitive little Methodist chapel.

Spurgeon didn't know anything about the primitive Methodists, he says, apart from he did that they sung so loud it made you a headache. But he said he didn't care if only he could learn how to be saved and get into the kingdom of God.

He went in there but the minister hadn't come that morning because of the snow. He was probably snowed in. It came to the sermon time and a rather thin looking fellow who must have been a shoemaker or a tailor made his way to the pulpit and Spurgeon said it is well for ministers to be instructed and educated but he said this man was really stupid.

He said, he took his text from Isaiah 45 which says look unto me and be saved all the ends of the earth. And Spurgeon said that the man had to stick to his text closely because he didn't have much else to say.

[16:21] He said he didn't even pronounce the words of the text properly but he said that didn't matter if only I could get a gleam of hope from it. Spurgeon said he went on don't take a great deal of pain to look even a child can look.

It's not lifting a finger or a toe it's just look. That's all the text says look unto me. Jesus Christ went on and says look to me. Look at me sweating drops of blood in the garden.

Look at me hanging on the cross. Look at me dead and buried. Look at me risen again and so on.

After ten minutes Spurgeon said he came to the end of his tether and he had nothing else to say.

He turned and looked at fifteen year old Spurgeon sitting under the gallery and said young man you look very miserable and you will be very miserable in life and miserable in death unless you obey the words of my text.

And then Spurgeon said he lifted his hands and he yelled as only a primitive Methodist could look to Jesus Christ young man look to Jesus Christ look look. Spurgeon said even though the packaging was offensive and repulsive and not refined at all I went out of that primitive Methodist chapel having entered the kingdom of God.

[17:40] Now come back to our text. Paul is saying hold on to the truth of Jesus Christ. There was that time when the Galatians in spite of the packaging in spite of how repulsive the apostle Paul was received the gospel.

you nevertheless received the truth of it and now he says we're in another situation. Look at verse 16 it shouldn't be a question mark there it should be an exclamation mark.

So then have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? What does he mean by that? He's saying they've come now to another situation in which I've conveyed the truth to you and the truth is unattractive to you.

This time it's not the packaging so much it's what he said. I brought you a chastening word. I brought you a correcting word, a rebuking word. I've rebuked you for that tendency to depart and drift from the good news of the Lord Jesus.

And so now you regard me as your enemy? The truth again is unattractive. But Galatians remember how you originally received it when there was nothing to commend it as far as beauty or attraction or glitz.

[18:57] Am I your enemy? Am I your enemy because I put you under the criticism of the word of God? He's saying hold on to the truth of Jesus Christ even when it criticises you.

And that's a great challenge to us, isn't it? Do we hold on to the truth of Christ, the word of God, even when that word rebukes you or criticises you or corrects you?

Are we willing to receive that? Are we willing to receive the word of Christ when it comes to us in an unattractive form? When it doesn't comfort but it corrects?

When it wounds and when it bruises, do we still receive it as Christ's truth? Proverbs 27, 6 famously says, doesn't it?

Faithful are the wounds of a friend. And so for us as a church family, do we hold on to the truth of Christ even when it corrects us?

[20 : 01] When it cuts us? When it pulls us up short? Do you submit to it? Thirdly, there's something else that you must do and this is what's helped me this week is you must evaluate the servants of Christ.

That's verses 17, 20. You must evaluate the servants of Christ. You've heard this before. The pastor, the vicar, the minister, whatever we call him, it's still a tough job.

If he visits the flock, he's nosy. If he doesn't, he's a snob. If he preaches longer than 10 minutes, it's too long. If he preaches less than 10 minutes, then he can't have prepared his sermons and what are we paying for?

If he runs a car, he's worldly. If he doesn't, he's always late for appointments. If he tells a joke, he's flippant. If he doesn't, he's far too serious. If he starts the service on time, his watch must be fast. If he's a minute late, he's keeping the congregation waiting. If he takes a holiday, he's never in the parish. If he doesn't, he's a stick in the mud. If he runs a gala or a bazaar, he's money mad. If he doesn't, there's no social life in the parish.

[21 : 09] If he has the church painted and redecorated, he's extravagant. And if he doesn't, the church is shabby. If he's young, he's inexperienced. If he's getting old, he ought to retire. But when he dies, there's no one like him.

Well, Paul speaks about himself here, and he speaks about the difficulties of ministry. And he contrasts himself with these false teachers.

And I find this very, very helpful. Look what he says in verses 17 and 18. He says, they make much of you. And they zealously seek you.

Not out of a good motive. Why do they make much of you? Why do they make a fuss of you? Why do they seek you in order to shut you off and shut you out?

And that's what they want to do. They want to shut you out from me, says the Apostle Paul. They want to shut you out in order that you might zealously seek them. So verse 17, evaluate these teachers.

[22 : 19] Evaluate those who come to you. Evaluate those people who aren't seeking you out of a proper motive. But they're seeking you that you would be zealous after them.

And their ministry. And they are seeking you for their own reputation. And for their own ego. And they are seeking your loyalty.

And I think this is something really, really subtle. And it can happen in churches like ours. And we can fall for it so easily. And it happens in our constituency, if that's the right word. that we can be made to feel special by Christian leaders.

C.S. Lewis has got this beautiful article about the inner ring. And all of us want to be made to feel special. To be made as if we're one of the favourites.

And in doing so, what happens when Christian leaders do that is they are demanding loyalty. And Paul says, in contrast, he says, let me show you, in contrast, the heart of a genuine apostle.

[23 : 42] And so in our constituency, in churches like us, how's it been done? It's been done on special trips. It's been done by giving cards. It's been done by lots of things where people are made to feel, I'm in.

I'm in with the minister. But Paul says, let me show you the heart of a genuine apostle. And it's as if he rips open. He throws up his hands and he pleads for them.

And look what it says. It's an incredible thing. It says, my little children, for whom I'm again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.

That's what we're about. That's what he's saying. And so you want to know if you're a genuine servant of Christ or not, or whether you yourself are genuine.

Then you ask in the case of a minister, for instance, Calvin says this, if ministers wish to do anything, let them labour to form Christ, not to form themselves in their hearers.

[24 : 46] themselves. It's a remarkable phrase. Let them labour to form Christ, not to form themselves in their hearers. So the apostle Paul, he's not content that Christ should just dwell in their hearts.

That's a wonderful truth. That Christ dwells in their hearts by faith. That is a glorious truth. But he's not content with that. He wants to see Christ formed in them.

He wants to see Christ formed in his hearers so that they take on maturity and wisdom and his likeness.

He wants them to be growing into the shape of Jesus Christ and the character of Christ. And he says, I have birth pains over that. Until Christ is formed in you.

And that is the motive that must dominate Christ's servants. I think many of you here know that.

[25 : 53] If you are a Christian parent here tonight, you know what it's like to have birth pains. If you're a Christian parent or you grew up in a Christian home and you had Christian parents, let me tell you, in your home your parents had birth pains.

All over again, for those you love. Isn't it true that there are Christian parents who in one sense, they felt this, they feel the agony of it, they feel the birth pains.

We pray, like we prayed earlier, the sex petition of the Lord's Prayer of the Heidelberg Catechism for our children, don't we? We pray, lead them not into temptation, but deliver them from the evil one.

And isn't it true that some of you tonight, you know, tonight even, those birth pains, that you long for Christ to be formed in them. That they would walk in His wisdom and in His maturity and they'd show His likeness.

And surely that should be our desire as a church, isn't it? As individual believers within the church, what are we aiming at? What are we driving at?

[27 : 05] What do we want you children and young people to grow up like? that Christ would be formed in you, and me and others?

And so as we finish the year, Galatians I think for us, some really pointed questions at the end of the year. It asks you tonight, do you genuinely know God? Or are you merely practicing religion? them? And then secondly, Galatians 4 asks us, when the word of God brings criticism to you, which it inevitably does, do I turn away from it?

If you're like me, you tend to really welcome the comfort of scripture, but refuse its criticism.

baptism. And can you say that the supreme yearning of your own life is that Christ be formed in you?

Because that was the apostolic priority. Because the Holy Spirit and the Apostle and his word and his appeal leap over the centuries, tonight, shortly, to the end of 2025.

[28 : 20] And they investigate our hearts, that Christ may be formed in us. Let's pray.