

Galatians 4:8-11  
The Foolishness of Returning to the Law

Introduction: Religious ritual has a fascination for many. Pageantry, festivals, ceremonies, and symbolism quickly capture the imagination. Religious feelings can be stirred by certain music, or awakened by the sight of a stained-glass window. In contrast, the emphasis on truth and faith and worship in the spirit can appear drab and unexciting. It is possible to observe the ritual and miss the truth. Participation in a ritual is much less demanding than submitting one's life to God and living a daily walk in conformity with His word. (Kent)

**Paul compares their lives as unbelievers and believers—4:8-9**

- 1) Their past—<sup>8</sup> *But [ἀλλά]... on the one hand [μὲν],*
  - a) Their spiritual existence as unbelievers
    - i) *you<sup>pl</sup> were bondslaves* [aor. act. ind. δουλεύω] (cf. 3:23; 4:1)
      - (1) Slaves to unreality—to those that by nature [φύσις] are not gods.
        - (a) They were either stones/metal/wood or demons (cf. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:20), but not gods (cf. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 8:5-6; Acts 17:29).
        - (2) Remember Acts 14:11-18.
        - (3) Only the true God possesses the distinctive nature that makes Him worthy of worship.... He is simply the kind of being that deserves worship. (Frame, DoG, 216, 389)
    - b) The time frame of their slavery
      - i) **at that time** [τότε] (emphatic), *when you<sup>pl</sup> did not know* [pf. act. ptc. εἰδῶ] *God*, (cf. Matthew 11:27; Acts 17:23; 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 4:5; 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 1:8; Titus 1:16)
        - (1) When they were slaves and not sons (cf. 4:7)
  - 2) Their present—<sup>9</sup> *But ... on the other hand [δέ],*
    - a) A surprisingly inconsistent step backward—*how are you<sup>pl</sup> turning back* [pres. act. ind. ἐπιστρέφω] *again* [πάλιν] (not yet a completed action)
      - i) To the ineffective and bankrupt—to [ἐπί] *the weak* [ἀσθενής] *and destitute* [πτωχός] *rudimentary elements* [στοιχείον],
        - (1) A return to the legalist Judaism would be a return to spiritual weakness and poverty, when God has already made them heirs.
        - (2) The true God is omnipotent and all-sufficient. What a contrast!
      - ii) *to which things you<sup>pl</sup> again* [πάλιν] *desire* [pres. act. ind. θέλω] *to be enslaved* [pres. act. inf. δουλεύω] *again* [ἄνωθεν]?
    - b) The time frame of their turning back—when you know better
      - i) Knowledge from man's perspective—*now* [νῦν], *that you<sup>pl</sup> have come to know* [aor. act. ptc. γινώσκω] *God*,
      - ii) More precisely, knowledge from God's perspective—*or rather* [μᾶλλον] *be known* [aor. pass. ptc. γινώσκω] *by* [ὑπό] *God*,
        - (1) Involves personal love, regard, and choice
  - 3) They appear to be heading back to a life of ignorance, immaturity, and slavery.

**Paul's response to the evidence of their defection—4:10-11**

- 1) The evidence—<sup>10</sup> *You<sup>pl</sup> are scrupulously observing* [pres. mid. ind. παρατηρέω] *for yourselves ...*
  - a) What?
    - i) Sabbath—*days*
    - ii) New Moon festivals—*and months*
    - iii) Holy Seasons and Feasts (Passover, Tabernacles, etc.)—*and seasons*
    - iv) New Year, Sabbatical Years, Year of Jubilee—*and years*.
  - b) A slavish dedication to any or all of the observances is not what maturity in Christ should develop. (Rapa, Expositor's)
  - c) Why place yourselves in slavery to those times and seasons which never had authority over you in the first place?! Observing these seasons could not save the original observers, so why do you think these seasons are essential to your salvation?
- 2) Paul's response—<sup>11</sup> *I fear* [pres. dep. ind. φοβέω] *for you<sup>pl</sup>,*
  - a) *lest somehow* [μήπως] *I have labored* [pf. act. ind. κοπιάω] *unsuccessfully* [εἰκῆ] *for* [εἰς] *you<sup>pl</sup>.*
  - b) It can be demoralizing to pour your life and ministry, both public and private, into people who reject the word of God that you have tried to teach them. People for whom you have worked, prayed, and been concerned for may reject it all for their own selfish interests.
  - c) Paul fears that this turning back may have permanent results. Time will tell. Their response to his letter would determine whether his evangelistic ministry had produced genuine fruit or only leaves. The effect of his labor would be seen in their total acceptance or rejection of the influence of the Judaizers. (Gromacki)
  - d) How sad for such a faithful servant of the Lord to believe that all the life-threatening, sacrificial service he had given in behalf of the people of Galatia was worthless. All the travel, illness, loneliness, struggles, even the stoning he received at Lystra that left him for dead, was for nothing if they reverted to their old slavery.
- 3) Their wavering is inexplicable and inexcusable. They know better!
- 4) Righteousness and its attendant ethical lifestyle is a result of faith in God's promise, now displayed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. (Rapa, Expositor's)

**Take-home truth:** While the emphasis on truth and faith and worship in the spirit may at times appear drab and unexciting, it is possible to observe the external ritual and miss the truth.