

THE LABOR PAINS OF MINISTRY

Galatians 4:12-20

After spending so much time vigorously defending himself and the gospel he preaches with precise, formal arguments and instruction, in chapter 4 we finally get a glimpse of Paul's gentle pastoral heart in this passage. The reason he has been so sharp and so determined is because he loves these people. He doesn't just want to win an argument against false teachers. He really cares about these people and he wants to win back the hearts of the people to Christ. He wants them feeding on good gospel truths because he wants to see the church grow strong and healthy and more Christlike. That's his goal we see in verse 19. He says, "My children, ... I am again in labor over you until Christ is formed in you." He wants to see Christ formed in them. I believe that's the key idea here – to see Christ formed in people. And I didn't plan this text to come up on mother's day, but Paul here even likens his relationship with the church using a motherly metaphor – talking as if he needed to bear them again! That's why I've called this "The Pains of Church Planter", because the pain is intense – like a mom in labor – twice! For the same children. Well this surely didn't mean they needed to be born again, but he's using hyperbole to say he feels like he needs to start from scratch again and re-raise them. They should be eating solid food by now but here he is warming up the milk on the stove again. They'd ditched grace for Law and it was like stepping back into elementary school as we saw in the last passage. We know that they were saved because He calls them brethren in verse 12 and my children in verse 19 – but they are believers who have backslidden into error and they needed a fresh start in Christ. Now that they've been **saved by faith in Christ**, they need to learn how to **grow by faith in Christ** and not through keeping a list of rules and rituals, which is what the false teachers, known as Judaizer, were getting them sidetracked with. They were saved but now they needed to understand sanctification – this process of becoming more Christlike, which I always like to point out, is our chief responsibility as a redeemed individual and is the chief emphasis of this passage. This is a major goal in Paul's ministry coming to the surface here as he lays out his heart as a church planter and as he thinks about the whole disciple making process.

And here we see he would work towards that end with a certain strategy – being flexible at one point and inflexible at another. The four main points today revolve around the idea of flexibility insofar as it relates to **the goal of a reciprocating Christlikeness**. **Flexibility** carrying the idea of being able to adapt or change but **inflexibility** being the exact opposite, being unwilling to adapt or change or compromise. The first thing we notice that Paul did to achieve his goal of Christ being formed in others through his ministry was that he was flexible in his method.

I. **PAUL HAD A FLEXIBLE METHOD OF OUTREACH. (V. 12)**

Paul urges them to become as he is because **he has become as they are**.

A. **He brought the gospel to them. (v. 12)**

He became as they were to get the gospel to them. He was a Jew, but he became like a Galatian Gentile to reach these Galatians Gentiles. He didn't bring Law. I think 1 Corinthians 9 explains the best what he means by this: He became, "all things to all men, so that... by all means I might save some." "To the Jews, I became Jew, so that he might win Jews. To those under the Law, under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; To those without the law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it." So Paul would do what he could to reach people. He would flex a little, as long as it was still

pleasing to God. I think of it this way: if he was going to sit down and eat with some Jews under the Law, with the intention of sharing Christ with them, he would wash his hands before they ate, as they did, because they would be offended if he didn't, according to the Law. He didn't wash his hands anymore because of some subjection to the Law but because he didn't want it to become an **unnecessary hindrance** to the gospel or his witness. Because his disciple Timothy was part Jew, he was actually circumcised to broaden his usefulness to the circumcised. But with Titus, who was 100% Gentile, they didn't go that route. They actually left him (to Titus appreciation) uncircumcised, so he could testify to God's grace apart from circumcision.

Paul was a missionary. Where he went, he learned their culture. He talked their talk. He ate their food.¹ He did what he had to do to reach these people for Christ. That's what a missionary does. We need to do that more – learn about your neighbors, talk to them, eat with them. So when they ask what's different about you, you can share Christ with them. **Paul had given a lot to reach them and now he's calling for some reciprocation on their part.² That's what the disciple-making process is all about. It is a reciprocating, process that involves some intentional give and take on both parties.**

What does Paul mean “**become as I am**”? What was Paul like? I think specifically he's referring back to chapter 2:15-21. There Paul said he was resting in the fact that man is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ. He was dead to the Law and alive to God. He had been crucified with Christ and it was no longer he who lived but Christ lived in Him. The life he lives in the flesh he lives by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave Himself up for him. Paul was set free from the Law in Christ and as well, ...

B. He wanted them to be freed by the gospel. (v. 12)

When you look at Paul's past, and we did in chapter 1, we saw that he's been there; he's done that! Paul was at one point the most legalistic, performance-based man there was. He was zealous for the Law. He kept the Law to a T. But in Philippians he says, “It's all rubbish now’ – literally, it's all excrement (dung)! Because righteousness is not found through our works but through trusting Christ. Jesus paid it all! We can't work for it. We're save by faith in Christ and continue to grow through faith in Christ, knowing we died with Him and were raised to new life, just like Christ. It's a walk of faith.

From Paul's flexible method, we can see that we need to have meaningful contact with the Lord, while at the same time, being different from it. Christ did not sin, yet He spent much ministry time reaching out to sinners and tax collectors. We can't reach the world unless we're different from it, but that doesn't mean being totally separated from it. In it, but not like it.

The second way in which we see in how Paul remained flexible to see Christ formed in others is...

II. PAUL REMAINED FLEXIBLE TO GOD'S LEADING. (VV. 13-15)

He was always prayerfully seeking where God wanted him to go. When we look into the history of the Galatian church, we see that God didn't want him to go anywhere at the time. God kept him from moving on in this case. It was because of a bodily illness or infirmity that he preached the gospel to them. Some kind of physical difficulty kept him from moving on to wherever he wanted to go, and it was **this undesirable circumstance that became the open door through which the church was planted!** This is so typical of Paul. It didn't matter where he was, he was about the Lord's work. Even in prison, he'd reach the guards and other prisoners and use his downtime to write letters to the churches. He took advantage of any circumstance to further the work of God.

What was the illness? We can't say dogmatically what it was, as if we can know for certain, but I offer you a few **suggestions**. Some say it could have had something to do with **bad eyesight** because of his comment in verse 15, saying they would've plucked out their eyes and given them to him. Also, from 6:11, he talks about how he was writing to them with large letters, suggesting maybe he had trouble seeing and the thorn in his flesh could have been bad eyesight. He also had a secretary write his books for him, suggesting it was hard for him. Though I do believe he had eye problems, I'm not too convinced that that's all this was because whatever it was, it made him physically look repulsive. And that phrase about plucking your eyes out and giving them to me was a common expression of the time basically saying I'd be willing to do anything for you, even giving you the most important members of my body. Today it's like saying, "I'd give my right arm for that," or, "Gave the shirt off my back." Some also suggest that it may have been **malaria** because of the swampy area he would've been in at Pamphylia, and then maybe sought out higher ground in Galatia. This seems plausible because apparently malaria can cause jaundice, which would have turned his eyes and skin a yellowish color and on top of that, one commentator wrote that it can affect the optic nerve in the eye³, causing atrophy, colorblindness and blindness. And those are the two suggestions I've heard: Eye problems and malaria. I honestly think though it was the result of persecution.

The word used for 'illness' (*astheneia*) can and is translated most of the time as '**weakness**', referring to a **physical disability or natural limitation**. And it's the same word Paul used in 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul is, because of the boasting of the false teachers with their 'visions', silencing them with the fact that he too, has seen a vision – in fact, he has seen heaven. He talks about how he was caught up in the third heaven and saw inexpressible things that he was not permitted to speak and he says, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me [by God] a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me..." Three times he asked the Lord to remove it but God's didn't. God said His grace is sufficient and His power perfected in **weakness** (there's that same word again). "Therefore I am well content with weakness, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake." So it seems to me that his weakness might have had something to do with persecution and hardship for Christ. And where else do we find Paul being **persecuted the worst** but in Galatia, being beaten and stoned? Many thought he was dead and this is where many think he probably had his **heavenly vision** too. But it's also in Galatia where people were trying to worship him, as though he was deity. In Acts 14 Paul healed a man at Lystra who was lame from the womb and never walked before, and after seeing this, people started saying that the gods have become like men and referred to Barnabas as Zeus and Paul, Hermes. The people tried to worship them and offer sacrifices to them. They were enamored by the apostle. Because of this, Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and stoned Paul, dragging him out of the city and supposed him to be dead. Now after the disciples prayed for him he got up and it says he made many disciples. But you don't just come back from a stoning like that so I'm thinking he was making disciples while he's covered with these wounds. This seems to be the time to me where he might've looked very repulsive but at the same time were tempted to treat him like some deity because of how he came back to life from the stoning and many miracles and wonders were being done.⁴

But I don't want to get so caught up in the curiosity of the illness or weakness that we lose this incredible application that staring us in the face. What's this say to us? **How should we see the undesirable circumstances we go through? How should we handle the interruptions in our life that keep us from "moving forward"?** Because the result of an undesirable circumstance that

kept Paul from moving forward resulted in a church being planted! Abundant life doesn't mean we get a free ride *above* undesired circumstances but that we have the contentment and joy of the Holy Spirit *in* them or *through* them, and God *uses* them. I think our text today tells us **we need to learn to see undesirable circumstances as though they could be God's open doors!** It wouldn't be the first time God used sickness as a blessing (1 Samuel 30:13). **Maybe God wants to bring about redirection in your life.** Maybe He's got something else in mind other than your idea of what progress looks like. I think of Joni Erickson Tada, a well-known parapalegic and faithful witness for Christ. That difficult circumstance that she is in became her voice to reach millions. **Difficult times are opportunities for our faith to be used and proven and even increased.** It's in the difficult times that where this process of Christlikeness is formed in us more so than any other time. You can come to church and worship while everything's going well and looking up in life, but what about when cards get stacked against you? When your ministry falls apart? When cancer hits home? When persecution comes? When Satan sifts you like wheat, as he did with Job and Peter? **Here's what we find in those moments: For one, we find out if we're real.** Are our roots planted deep in Christ or are our roots shallow? When the heat of the sun hits, the difficult times of life, do we wither away? It's a pretty powerful thing to see someone who knows the Lord and yet is clearly dying of something they won't be healed from, worship and serve the Lord till the end. Second, **we find out where our source of joy come from.** Is it in Christ or just in good circumstances? The only way for your faith to pass that test is for the good circumstances to be removed. **Third, we find out if we really believe God is sovereign.** It's easy to believe in His sovereignty when things are favorable – when something miraculous happens in God's providence – someone's in the right place at the right time to save someone life. But when things gets tough, it takes sovereignty to a new level doesn't it? Does He know? Is He there? Joseph was the perfect example of passing this test. Thrown in the well, thrown in jail, yet faithful. God used those undesirable circumstances he went through to do His will. But even with the little things we need to remember God is sovereign: Maybe the reason your car wouldn't start and you were late for work is because He kept you from getting in a wreck. Maybe the reason we're sick is because God is protecting us from something else or has a good work in mind. God's sovereign in the good and bad and we need to be flexible to God's leading in undesirable circumstance.

Now let's look at where Paul wasn't flexible...

III. **PAUL WAS NOT FLEXIBLE WITH FALSE SHEPHERDS. (VV. 16-18)**

False shepherds don't want to see Christ formed in people – They want to undo and dismantle Christ's work in people's lives. Satan doesn't give up when people get saved – “That's it. I guess I lost another one.” No. He's got an army of false shepherds trying to deceive real Christians and it worked in Galatia. The Galatians now trusted the false teachers more than Paul. They considered him an enemy now. One commentator said, “He went from being an emissary from heaven to an enemy from hell.” And I want to point out a couple of major differences between a true shepherd and a false shepherd from verse 17.

A. False shepherds distract them from Christ. (v.17)

They eagerly seek people to shut people out from knowing Christ and growing in Him. These Judaizers took their focus from Christ, back to the Law. That's what false teachers with their works-based religions do. **They try to draw people to something other than Christ by preaching Christ, and Christ just becomes this springboard to their own desires.** This is a great passage to discuss the false shepherds of the Prosperity Gospel. **The Prosperity Gospel, or the Word of Faith movement**, is one of the most popular false gospels there is. There's a bunch of preachers

out there, many on your tv, who would tell you that God's will for your life is that you be healthy and wealthy – you're entitled to it – and the only thing standing between you and **your health** or **your wealth** that *you deserve* is faith. If you have enough faith, you can have it all. If you have enough faith, and you give to their ministry, you can be rich and healthy like them. Make a **positive confession** of faith – tell God what you want and claim it by faith. So the focus, or the aim, subtly gets shifted from God and living for God's glory, to God's gifts and living for your own happiness here and now. From treasures in heaven to treasures here and now.

Is it always God's will for you to be healthy and wealthy? Was it with Paul? No. Why? God's power and grace is perfected in weakness. But some who have bought into the health and wealth prosperity gospel can't seem to understand that. And it's not a new gospel. The idea that health and wealth are signs of divine favor have been around since Job was written. Job's friends erroneously concluded that Job's sickness was the result of divine chastisement. The people of Malta erroneously concluded that Paul's getting bit by a viper was the result of divine judgment. Some even think this was how Paul's condition was a trial to them – because it went against their false theology that health and wealth are always signs of divine favor. Studying the life of Paul puts that idea rest. He couldn't heal himself and couldn't heal some others. He left Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20) and told Timothy to use a little wine for the sake of his stomach and frequent ailments (1 Tim. 5:23). He didn't say, "Call on those with the gift of healing in your church and have them heal you." He essentially says take medicine. Medicine is God's provision and an answer to prayer. Can God still heal today? Absolutely. 100% yes. But it's through the power of prayer and if it's God's will. If these faith-healers on tv were the real deal, then God forbid them for walking past the children's hospitals or any hospital. If health and wealth is a sign of God's favor in your life, then as one man said, "God hated the apostle Paul." And He hates the martyrs who die for Him. The reality is that for many believers in the persecuted part of the world, earthly health and wealth is what they lost when they came to Christ. In many places when you come to Christ, you're disowned from your family and your inheritance, maybe beaten or martyred for your faith.

In verses Matthew 6:19-24 He said to watch out for what you have your eye on. Don't store up treasures on earth but in heaven. can't serve two masters at the same time. You either serve Me or money. Then He said this: "The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, you whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" What you have your eye on is what you're really focusing on and what you're after. In other words, if you're just doing things to get some type of blessing, then your darkness is so dark you think it's light. False shepherds shift the focus off of Christ to Christ's benefits. True shepherds keep the focus on Christ.

B. False shepherds are in it for themselves. (v. 17)

They eagerly seek people to shut them out. They shut them out so that people will then seek them. They're not in it for Christ or for the good of the flock. They want to draw people after them. They're narcissists. They admire themselves and want others to admire them. They want a position. Like the Pharisees, they wanted honor at banquets, chief seats in the synagogue, greetings in the markets. In 2 Cor. 11:12 Paul talked about false teachers desiring to be regarded as him – calling themselves apostles. They want that title. And the want numbers. He says in 6:13 that "They desire to have you circumcised so they can boast in your flesh." They wanted to boast about how many followers they had and converts they'd made. These Judaizers in particular were making people doubt faith in Christ was enough so they could lure them into their system of spiritual slavery and to get into their wallets. This why Paul didn't receive support from the church he was planting at the time. He didn't want to be accused of peddling the gospel for money or to gain a following like

the false teachers did who wanted to magnify their own name rather than Christ's. They **eagerly sought** the Galatians, but **not commendably**; not nobly. But while this is true, Paul wasn't opposed to have others teach them (v. 18). He considered it good to be sought in a commendable manner. He's not opposed to having other people teaching them while he wasn't present with them, if they were true shepherds. If you're sought in a noble manner, praise the Lord. That's fine.

IV. PAUL WAS NOT FLEXIBLE WITH HIS GOAL. (VV. 19-20)

- A. Paul's goal was to see Christ formed in them. He wouldn't settle for anything less than seeing Christ formed in them. Romans 8:29 which says, "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become **conformed to the image of His Son**." That's what we're all about. Christ **formed** in people – *morphoo* – transformed from the inside out. He wasn't pleased with the fact that the Galatians had been saved and that he could call them brothers or sisters, not that that's not great. But he wanted them press on in their faith and grow in their faith. He saw their sanctification and growing in Christlikeness just as important as their salvation. He wanted to see them mature, not swayed by ever wind of doctrine and false teaching but able to discern what's good and what's evil. What's *right* and what's *almost right*. He wanted to see Christ formed in them. Christ to be their everything. This sanctification process was hindered in Galatia and it left Paul **perplexed**. If you've been around the ministry long enough, you've seen this happen to people. They get saved, they're growing, they love the Lord, and then all suddenly they just go off the radar. Quit coming to church and start going back to old habits or false teaching. We're left scratching our heads. Paul, like a tender mother, begs (v. 12) the backslidden children of God to become as he is, fully fixed on the sufficiency of Christ and living for Him.

V. CONCLUDING APPLICATION:

This leaves us with the question: **Is Christ being formed in us? And what's it going to require?** I think that's going to require a few major decisions. For the unbeliever it begins with...

1. A complete trust in Christ.

Christ can't even begin to be formed in you unless you've trusted in Him. It starts with putting your trust in Christ to get to Heaven. Nothing else. Not your works, not your church attendance. Just trusting Christ.

For those **believers** who have backslidden into Law and legalism, it's going to require the believer to get back to a complete trust in Christ. **Secondly, it requires:**

2. A consistent intake of the Word of God.

Peter says, "Long for the pure milk of the word so that by it, you may grow in respect to salvation." Christ being formed is a process that requires prayerful study of the Word.

3. A continued decision to live for Him.

It's not enough just to read the Word. Knowledge is great – it's a quality we are told to add to our faith (2 Peter 1). But we're after Christlikeness – seeing lives changed. We have to make up our mind. He's either your Master or He's not. He's Lord, and we need to live like it. Be like Christ. Every day we wake up and say, "Here I am Lord, use me. Teach me to be more like You."

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, "Insights on Galatians," *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 8* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), 81.

² David A. DeSilva, The Letter to the Galatians, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 378.

³ John F. MacArthur, "Galatians," *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 117.

⁴ Andy Woods, *Galatians 4:12-20*, accessed 4 May 2019, www.spiritandtruth.org