

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

# Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

## Burning Questions 06 How Can a Good God Send People to Hell?

**John 3:16-21**

**Feb 12, 2017**

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Care Calling: Archie Miller

Host: Mike Rylant

Saturday 2/11 Clean Up: Archie Miller

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### **John 3:16-21 (NASB)**

**16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. 20 "For everyone who does evil hates the**

**Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> "But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."**

Well, if you thought last week's sermon had political impact, then this week's sermon is highly emotional.  
How can we justify saying "A Good God Sends People to Hell!"  
My guess is that you don't say that.

The idea of a loving God sending people to hell for eternity is not easy to accept.

Why would God, who is full of mercy and grace, send people to a place of torment forever and ever for not trusting in Jesus even though they are nice people, or never heard of Jesus, or were sincerely trying to find God?

Is that fair?

Is that right?

When people ask these questions, they are looking at the issue from their human fire perspective.

## **I. The Cremation vrs Burial Controversary**

I used to hear the emotional view of people who said, "Please don't cremate me. I am dreadfully afraid of fire."

Some people say Paul condemned cremation based on their view of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul discusses how God will raise the decomposed body of a believer.

The symbolism used is that of planting a seed and having new life rise from the decaying seed.

**1 Corinthians 15:35-44 (NASB)**

**<sup>35</sup> But someone will say, "How are the dead raised? And with**

what kind of body do they come?" <sup>36</sup> You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; <sup>37</sup> and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. <sup>38</sup> But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. <sup>39</sup> All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one *flesh* of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. <sup>40</sup> There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the *glory* of the earthly is another. <sup>41</sup> There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. <sup>42</sup> So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable *body*, it is raised an imperishable *body*; <sup>43</sup> it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; <sup>44</sup> it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual *body*.

And, they say that God Himself chose burial rather than cremation:  
Deuteronomy 34:45-6 (NASB)

<sup>5</sup> So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. <sup>6</sup> And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day.

And, they are quick to point out that most of the reference to burning of a body in the Bible are instances of:  
punishment for criminal acts,  
punishment for improper behavior,  
killings by Pagans, or  
destruction of idols and evil material.

And, of course, Cremation can be an aid to murderers.  
Once a body has been cremated, it cannot be exhumed and

analyzed for poisons.

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America opposes cremation. They state that:

"The Church considers cremation to be the deliberate desecration and destruction of what God has made and ordained for us. The Church instead insists that the body be buried so that the natural physical process of decomposition may take place. The Church does not grant funerals, either in the sanctuary, or at the funeral home, or at any other place, to persons who have chosen to be cremated."

The Roman Catholic Church used to condemn the practice. In fact, the only German Catholics formally excommunicated by the Church during World War II were not prison guards at extermination camps or other mass murderers; they were three individuals who promoted cremation.

That view of the Roman Catholic Church was changed in 1963, as they now accept cremation.

And, you can understand the position of the Jews, whose revulsion of being cremated is reinforced by recent memories of the millions of Jews who were cremated in the death camps of Nazi Germany.

As the catacombs in Rome attest, the early Christians insisted on burying their dead.

Christian gravesites were called **coemeteria** (*Latin for cemeteries*), which literally means "sleeping places," reflecting belief in a future resurrection.

The Presbyterian preacher George Buttrick once said, "There is nothing more incongruous than dressing up a corpse in a tuxedo!"

I learned recently of a practice in which Cremation can be done in ways that desecrate rather than respect the dead.

You can now order designer urns in which elements of a loved one's "cremains" are mixed with clay and glazed to create a piece of lovely pottery!

However, cremation can be more economical, because a simple container can be used in place of an expensive casket.

The cost associated with the purchase and perpetual care of a grave site or tombstone is avoided.

Cemetaries often occupy large areas of urban real estate that can be expensive to maintain.

And, here in Santa Maria, the Mexican community which two years ago avoided cremations, have for the most part turned to this dramatically less costly alternative.

At the resurrection it will not make any difference whether a person's body has been buried or cremated.

God knows how to raise the body, either in the resurrection of life or the resurrection of condemnation

**John 5:28-29 (NASB)**

**28 "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, <sup>29</sup> and will come forth; those who did the good *deeds* to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil *deeds* to a resurrection of judgment.**

The new body of a Christian will be a radically changed and glorified body like the body of the exalted Christ.

It will be an eternal, spiritual body never again to experience weakness, disease, suffering, or death.

**Philippians 3:20-21 (NASB)**

**20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; <sup>21</sup> who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.**

(cf: 1 Corinthians 15:35-54)

For we who believe in the God of Creation, we KNOW that cremation cannot prevent a sovereign God from calling forth the dead at the end of time.

The real question for Christians is not whether one is buried or cremated but the meaning given to these acts.

**So, how do you see hell?**

Is it "Hell, yes!"

or

"Hell, no!"

Most bible believers agree that hell is real, but there is considerable disagreement on its nature.

And, I highly recommend you read Brian Jones book: Heaven is Real, but I hate to Admit it.

SO...let's think about this.

## **II. The Metaphors of Hell**

John Blanchard, in his book "What ever happened to hell?" points out that

“of 1870 verses recording words which Jesus spoke, thirteen per cent are about judgement and hell. Jesus spoke more about these two topics than about any other.”

Also, Blanchard says: “of about fifty parables Jesus told, more than half of them relate to God’s eternal judgement of sinners.”

Here is a little gem written by a Catholic priest known quite appropriately as Father Furnace.

He was named as the children's apostle, and here he is describing what's going to happen to little children in hell.

". . . his eyes are burning like two burning coals, two long flames come out of his ears, sometimes he opens his mouth and breath of blazing fire rolls out. But listen!

There is a sound just like that of a kettle boiling. Is it really a kettle boiling? No. Then what is it? Hear what it is. It is the blood boiling in the scalding veins of that boy. The brain is boiling and bubbling in his head. The marrow is boiling in his bones."

That is a very graphic word picture; it grabs at your heart and mind.

Don't you agree that Hell is a subject that we deal with reluctantly, and one we would rather not think about at all.

Well, you are in good company.

In fact, God himself would prefer not to deal with it

**2 Peter 3:9 (NASB)**

**9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.**

But, hell is for real, and the bible gives us many images of its reality.

**"Hell" is a metaphor.**

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable; a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract.

"I had fallen through a trapdoor of depression."

And, there are synonyms used for metaphors, such as: figure of speech, image, analogy, comparison, symbol, word picture.

**And, the bible uses a lot of images to help us understand just how horrible being separated from God is.**

However, it is God's own righteousness that makes hell a reality, and it is our determination to uphold His righteousness and the authority of His Word that now leads us to talk about hell.

The first image of hell is that of a *garbage dump*.

This is the image portrayed by the term properly translated as “hell,” namely, *Gehenna*:

This word refers literally to a small valley (called **Hinnom** in Bible days) just south of Jerusalem.

It was an abomination to the Jews because it had been used for child sacrifice and idol worship in the days of King Ahaz and King Manasseh.

Jeremiah says the Valley of Hinnon was placed under God’s curse, and it came to be used as a garbage pit,

“a public rubbish dump in which all the offal and filth of Jerusalem was poured. Later, the bodies of animals and even the corpses of criminals were flung there and left to rot or to be consumed by the fire that was kept constantly burning to dispose of the stinking mass of garbage.”

This leads to the most common image of the final state of the wicked, namely, *fire*.

Gehenna as a garbage pit was itself a place of unending fire and smoke, which led Jesus to speak of

**Mark 9:48 (NASB)**

**48 where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.**

In addition to the the concept of hell as a place of fire being derived from the Gehenna image, it also a common idea that God’s wrath is like a raging fire.

This is a common OT theme:

**Psalm 11:6 (NASB)**

**6 Upon the wicked He will rain snares; Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup.**

**Malachi 4:1 (NASB)**

**1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day**



**that is coming will set them ablaze," says the LORD of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch."**

But it is also in the New Testament:

**Hebrews 12:29 (NASB)**

**29 for our God is a consuming fire.**

So it is no surprise that fire is the dominant image for hell since it is a common way of representing God's wrath.

Hell is called

"the hell of fire"

"eternal fire"

"unquenchable fire"

"the furnace of fire"

"the lake of fire"

and "fire and brimstone"

When most people think of hell, they think of fire.

### **III. What is Jesus and His Bible Telling Us?**

So, just what is "fire and brimstone" pointing us to?

What is Jesus and His bible telling us?

What is Jesus saying to us by using these images?

Hellfire and brimstone are not literal depictions of hell's furnishings, but figurative expressions warning the wicked of impending doom.

Leon Morris says that "Scripture uses symbolic terms of necessity to refer to realities beyond the grave."

If the language is symbolic, what does it symbolize?

The language points to "an existence of loss."

Hell is defined as separation from the Father, the Son, and the Spirit for eternity, and that all the other images are ways of emphasizing the suffering that this will cause.

If there is one basic characteristic of hell, it is, in contrast to

heaven, the absence of God or banishment from his presence. It is an experience of intense anguish, whether it involve physical suffering or mental distress or both.”

In *The Great Divorce* C.S. Lewis offers a picture of hell as “the grey town” in perpetual twilight “with its continual hope of morning” which never arrives.

In it are “the cold and the gloom, the lonely, lonely streets” where even the people live “millions of miles” from each other.

Whatever these images may symbolize, the reality will be worse than the symbols.

If fire is the biblical image, something terrible must be meant by it, even if it is a metaphor.

Hell will be a place of *suffering*.

The main point, though, seems to be mental suffering, such as the bitterness of remorse and hopeless self-condemnation.

The pain suffered will be due to the shame and sorrow resulting from the punishment of final, ultimate, unending banishment from God, his kingdom, and the good life for which we were created in the first place.

Hell’s occupants will deeply and tragically regret all they lost.

The Apostle Paul says

**Romans 2:9 (NASB)**

**<sup>9</sup> *There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil***

Tribulation possibly refers to bodily afflictions and distress to the accompanying inward or mental anguish and torment.

Hell is real, and its suffering is real.

Whatever its nature, it is worse than physical death.

There will indeed be everlasting, conscious, mental and physical torment in various degrees according to the life people have lived here on earth.

But the essence of that torment is relational in nature: the banishment from heaven and all it stands for.

The biblical images of hell definitely give us the picture of a horrible situation where the lost are eternally out of God's presence.

But, this does not give God pleasure.

**2 Peter 3:9 (NASB)**

**9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.**

**Ezekiel 18:30-32 (NASB)**

**30 "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct," declares the Lord GOD. "Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. <sup>31</sup> "Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? <sup>32</sup> "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord GOD. "Therefore, repent and live."**

**Ezekiel 33:10-11 (NASB)**

**10 "Now as for you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'Thus you have spoken, saying, "Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we are rotting away in them; how then can we survive?"' <sup>11</sup> "Say to them, 'As I live!' declares the Lord GOD, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?'**

God really doesn't want us to be in hell.

Let me share a few select comments from Patristic writers regarding their thoughts on hell:

“For estrangement and turning away from God are more unbearable than the punishments expected in hell, and more oppressive to the one suffering than the deprivation of light is to the eye, even if no pain is added to it, or than the deprivation of life is to a living creature.”

*Basil the Great, d. 379AD*

“We surely ought not to think that what is referred to as "hell" is a place, but a state of life, invisible and incorporeal, to which Scripture teaches us that souls lead.”

*Gregory of Nyssa, d.384AD*

“After all, the reason we ought to be in fear and dread of hell is not the undying fire, the terrible punishments, the unremitting retribution, but rather offending such a good Lord and finding ourselves outside his benevolence.”

*John Chrysostom, d. 407AD*

But, the question asked that this sermon is to answer is...

#### **IV. How Can a Good God Send People to Hell?**

Is the doctrine of hell as eternal suffering consistent with the Bible’s teaching about the nature of God.

The opponents of the doctrine charge specifically that it contradicts the goodness and love of God, the justice of God, and the sovereignty of God.

God’s love is NOT the only aspect of his nature that must be taken into account in the matter of the eternal destinies of mankind.

The Apostle John make it clear:

**1 John 4:8 (NASB)**

<sup>8</sup> God is love.

Love is one side of God's moral nature but not the only one. God is equally a God of holiness and wrath, a God of both kindness and severity.

**Romans 11:22-23 (NASB)**

**22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23 And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.**

God is a God who both saves and destroys.

Because of his nature as love God wants to save sinners and has done everything divinely possible to do so; but when free-will creatures rebel against his holiness and reject his love, his righteousness requires his wrath to be poured out upon them.

We cannot ignore the latter side of God's nature.

He is a God who says,

**Hebrews 10:30-31 (NASB)**

**30 "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." 31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**

God is just as much a God of holiness as he is a God of love.

Heaven is the final outworking of his love; hell is the final outworking of his holiness.

The response of holiness to sin is wrath, and hell is the just and righteous expression of God's wrath toward unrepentant sinners.

Habermas and Moreland say it thus:

“If people reject an ultimate God who is the greatest being that could possibly exist, then an ultimate judgment where one pays with one's life in a final, irrevocable sense is just.”

Actually, God has provided two infinite responses to sin: the infinite sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and infinite suffering in hell.

God does not "send" anyone to hell arbitrarily. He gives us all free will to obey his laws; sin itself is our choice. Then he provides us with salvation from sin and hell through Jesus Christ; refusing to accept this salvation is our choice.

When Jesus stood and looked over the city of Jerusalem, He said **Matthew 23:37-38 (NASB)**

**37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. 38 "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!**

### **You were unwilling**

No one can say that he is suffering the eternal consequences of his sin without warning and contrary to his own will.

Must God punish?

Yes, God must punish those who break His law because it is the right thing to do.

Just as a parent should punish a child for intentionally doing something wrong, so God must punish those who do wrong.

You see, if God did not punish the person who does wrong, then He would be unjust and unrighteous.

He would be breaking His own law -- which He cannot do.

But, someone might say that the punishment of a parent on a child is temporary whereas God's punishment is eternal.

Why the difference?

The answer is two-fold.

First, God is infinite and a parent is not.

Second, God is the standard of all righteousness and the parent is not.

Because God is infinite, when we sin, we are offending an infinite God.

This is incredibly significant.

The reason sin is so bad is not so much because of the one committing the sin, but because of the One who is offended.

In other words, sin is so incredibly bad because it takes on a horrible quality by the very fact of who it is against; an infinitely pure, holy, and righteous God.

Amid all the hyperboles, symbols, and metaphors, Jesus stressed one central truth.

Whatever Hell is, the worst part about it is separation from God.

What if such a person, while living on the earth, no matter how many times God pursued, convicted, or attempted to draw him toward himself, always responded the same?

He said to himself, "I don't want God. I don't need God. I want nothing to do with him!"

Do you really believe God is bound by goodness to override a person's freedom and force his way into their lives?

This is simply not the way God works!

As the ultimate respecter of freewill, God grants a person his ultimate wish for all of eternity.

He simply places any man or woman who has separated himself from God in a realm the bible calls Hell whereby he can be apart from Him forever.

The misery of hell will be so great that no one will want to be there.

They will be weeping and gnashing their teeth.

Between their sobs, they will not speak the words, “I want this.” They will not be able to say amid the flames of the lake of fire, “I want this.”

**Revelation 14:11 (NASB)**

**11 "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast**

No one wants this.

Think about this!

God has pursued you all of your life!

He has convicted you of right and wrong in hopes of deterring you from doing evil.

He has painted his presence across the sky in every sunset!

He has spoken quietly to your spirit in the deep of the night.

He has inspired you, at opportune moments in your life, to ask life's deepest questions.

In short, he has compelled you day after day, urging you into a deep relationship with him.

Yet, all of your life you have ignored him.

Fearing that you may have to give up your own agenda and become part of his, you ran from God in a constant act of rejection, claiming, ‘I don't want God!’

Then eternity comes.

In a cruel but just twist, the very thing you deeply desire, in the twinkling of an eye, becomes a full-blown reality.

You become unhinged forever from the Creator's moorings.

There is misleading notion that God does not “send” people to hell. But this is simply unbiblical.

God certainly does send people to hell.

He does pass sentence, and he executes it.

Indeed, worse than that.

God does not just “send,” he “throws.”

**Revelation 20:15 (NASB)**

**15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.**



The reason the Bible speaks of people being “thrown” into hell is that no one will willingly go there, once they see what it really is. No one standing on the shore of the lake of fire jumps in. They do not choose it, and they will not want it.

They have chosen sin.  
They have wanted sin.  
They do not want the punishment.

When they come to the shore of this fiery lake, they must be thrown in.

You may have a glimpse of what that world would be like, but it remains a far cry from the reality of what any place without God’s oversight would entail.

What untold evil runs rampant when the hand of God is completely removed?

More than anything else, this is the point Jesus was trying to make. Completely remove God and you completely remove the possibility of anything good.

In the words of C.S. Lewis, a “God-shaped void” has been placed within the human heart encouraging all to seek the One who wants desperately to be found.

Rather than choosing to lord his power over the earth and force freewill men and women to submit, God seems ever to draw us to himself, giving us the final say in whether we enter into relationship with him or not.

Only then can this genuine love, the greatest value in God’s creation scenario, be given and received.

I thank God, as a hell-deserving sinner, for Jesus Christ my Savior, who became a curse for me and suffered hellish pain that he might deliver me from the wrath to come.

While there is time, he will do that for anyone who turns from sin and treasures him and his work above all.

The Bible says,  
**Acts 2:38 (translation)**

**38 All of you must turn to God and change the way you think and act, and each of you must be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will receive the Holy Spirit as a gift.**

That can be hard for many but it's a real opportunity to obey perhaps one of the most fundamental commands in Scripture. I know some of you don't want to get wet in front of people. Jesus leaves his throne in glory, comes down to the earth, is scourged by the Romans, stretches out his hands, and dies for you. And you don't want to get wet?"

You know the greatest thing about baptism?

It's the great equalizer.

Whether you've got a 50-dollar haircut or a 2-dollar haircut, when you come out of the water you're all going to look the same!

If Jesus is truly your Lord and Savior and he asked you to be baptized, why on earth would you say, "No."

Because it's too hard?

Because you do not want to get wet in front of people?

I am confident Jesus will ask you to do harder things than this as you progress in your faith.

Your sin separates you from God.

God's not expecting you to be perfect.

Just say you're sorry and turn and start living his way.

Be immersed.

Then trust Jesus to forgive you of your sin.

## **Prayer and Invitation**

## February 12 Lesson 11 New Birth Brings Freedom

Devotional Reading: [Romans 8:1-11](#)

Background Scripture: [Galatians 4](#)

### **GALATIANS 4:8-20**

**8** Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. **9** But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? **10** You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! **11** I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. **12** I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you. You did me no wrong. **13** As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, **14** and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. **15** Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. **16** Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? **17** Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. **18** It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you. **19** My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, **20** how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!

### **Key Verse**

*Now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?—[Galatians 4:9](#)*

### **Introduction**

#### **A. Freedom in Name Only**

A country is ruled oppressively. One day its people rise up and overthrow the oppressors. To mark a new beginning of freedom, they give their country a new name, perhaps beginning with something like “Democratic Republic of ...”

But in time, oppression returns. The country’s people are as bad off as they were before, if not worse. The country’s new name endures, but only as a mockery of lost ideals. This tragic story has repeated itself too often.

Our text tells an even greater tragedy of lost freedom. It is the account of believers who gave up (or were on the verge of giving up) their freedom in Christ to return to the bondage they knew before having received the gospel.

## B. Lesson Background

Our study picks up where last week's concluded at Galatians 4:7. The letter's critical tone continues, necessary because of the crisis then at hand. The crisis centered on this question: Should believers in Christ be required to adhere to the requirement of circumcision as set forth in the Law of Moses?

Paul's opponents answered this with a *yes*, to which Paul counterpunched with the emphatic *no* we saw last week. The stakes were high. If Paul's opponents prevailed on the issue of circumcision, then imposition of other stipulations in the Law of Moses (Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.) would not be far behind, further negating the sufficiency of Christ's work. *Judaizers* is the term most often used to designate Paul's opponents in this regard. A Judaizer was someone who (1) adhered to the Jewish way of life and (2) intended to require Gentiles to adopt it as well. Judaizers thought it reasonable that the boundaries of the church should be defined by the rite of circumcision as given to Abraham and his descendants (see Genesis 17:9-14).

Some students propose that the Judaizers who were creating problems in Galatia were members of the church in Jerusalem, being "some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees" (Acts 15:5). Having gone on misguided missions to Christians of Gentile background in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, the Judaizers had disturbed and troubled those believers with false teaching (compare Acts 15:23, 24). They are conjectured to have done the same in Galatia.

Also worthy of consideration is the era of growing Jewish nationalism during which Paul ministered. That was a time when it may have been controversial for Jews to associate with non-Jews (Gentiles). Perhaps some Jews encouraged circumcision of Gentile Christians in order to make it easier for Jewish Christians to fellowship with them without being criticized by nationalists.

In any case, those who insisted on circumcision also presumed that their authority in the matter was greater than Paul's. This challenge is discerned from the lengthy defense Paul makes for his apostleship in Galatians 1:1-2:10. Paul referred to his opponents as those who "are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ" (1:7).

### I. Wrong Focus

(Galatians 4:8-11)

#### A. Witless Slavery (v. 8)

**8. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.**

Paul offers a reminder to the Galatian Christians of non-Jewish background what their previous lives really were. To have been *slaves to those who by nature are not gods* indicates that those believers had been followers of

Greco-Roman religions. As such, they typically would have worshipped various fictitious gods, represented by idols, that were believed to hold power over aspects of the world (see Acts 17:22-29). No one loves these gods. But many people fear them, believing they can cause problems for those who displease them. The worshippers' aim is to appease these gods with regular offerings, which function more as bribes than acts of heartfelt worship. This went hand in hand with being ignorant of the true God. It was a state of enslavement to falsehood. This was the life Gentiles left behind when they believed the gospel.

### How to Say It

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Antioch *An-tee-ock*.

Cilicia *Sih-lish-i-uh*.

Galatians *Guh-lay-shunz*.

Gentiles *Jen-tiles*.

Judaizers *Joo-duh-ize-ers*.

Pharisees *Fair-ih-seez*.

### **B. Willing Slavery (vv. 9, 10)**

**9. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?**

That life of ignorant enslavement is now past. Galatians who had worshipped false gods now know the one true God through the good news of Jesus. But even better than knowing the true God is being *known by God*. Those formerly alienated from him now belong in truth to God's true people (compare 1 Corinthians 8:3).

To add circumcision to the gospel would be to return to the past. But how can that be true when the past for the Gentile Christians was not slavery to requirements of the Law of Moses, but to pagan gods? Here we must understand what Paul means by *weak and miserable forces*.

Behind the translations *miserable forces* here and “elemental spiritual forces” in Galatians 4:3 (last week's lesson) is the same Greek word. We noted in lesson 10 that the word *elemental* in that context means “something that is basic or elementary, such as learning one's ABCs.” This “something” helps bring a person from an immature state to the intended, fully mature state. Last week's commentary offered a proposal that Paul refers to the Law of Moses as such a basic element (Galatians 4:3-5), something to be set aside when maturity comes.

But for Gentiles, Paul sees pagan worship as another kind of basic element. In its falsehood, such worship leaves the person anxious and hungry for the truth. So ironically enough, both the Law of Moses and idolatrous practices belong to the same category of “things followed in the past but now set aside

by the good news of Jesus.”

So for Gentile Christians to add circumcision to their faith in Christ is to return to another version of the past that must be left behind. For both Jew and Gentile, that past is not one of freedom and blessing, but of slavery and a curse (Galatians 3:10). For emphasis, Paul uses two words in the original language to signify *again* in the last line of verse 9.

### *What Do You Think?*

What “weak” things tempt Christians to return to past sin? How do you resist these personally?

### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Regarding issues of thoughts and attitudes

Regarding issues of acceptable behavior

Regarding manner of speech

### ***BACK-TO-EGYPT SYNDROME?***

Many former Soviet satellite countries were set free after the Soviet Union began to collapse in 1989. People rejoiced for a while at their newfound freedom. But when they realized the guaranteed pensions and other Soviet social programs were no longer available to them, they began longing for the “good ol’ days.” This desire encouraged pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine to create conditions that encouraged Russia’s invasion of their country in 2014.

What happened in Ukraine illustrates the tendency to pine for the past when change comes, even if that change was once highly desired. We might dub this the Back-to-Egypt Syndrome, per the desires recorded in Numbers 14:1-4.

Some victims of the false teaching in Galatia (and perhaps even the false teachers themselves) seemed to have felt that way, uneasy with the radical change brought about by the gospel. The temptation to add stipulations from the “tried and true” Law of Moses was very appealing! But that law is analogous to the first stage of a multistage rocket: after that first stage serves its function, it drops away.—C. R. B.

### **10. You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!**

With circumcision comes the obligation to keep other elements of the Law of Moses. These include observances of the Jewish ritual calendar: weekly Sabbaths, monthly new moon festivals, annual feasts like Passover, and special celebrations such as the year of jubilee. Paul mentions these as elements of the law that pointed to fulfillment in Christ (Colossians 2:16, 17, 20-22). To obligate oneself to obey these—as if they have something to do with one’s relationship with God—is to reject Christ in favor of things designed to encourage people to look to him.

*What Do You Think?*

What are some telltale signs that a church's observances of special times of the year have become stumbling blocks? How do we keep that from happening?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Regarding observances that have a scriptural reference (Christmas, Easter, etc.)

Regarding secular, cultural observances (Mother's Day, Independence Day, etc.)

Regarding events unique to the congregation (anniversaries, etc.)

**C. Wasted Work (v. 11)**

**11. I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.**

Paul notes how deeply the Galatian Christians' actions in this matter are affecting him. The Galatians are his work in the gospel. Their faith in Christ is the fruit of his ministry as a missionary. He is devoting his life to sharing the good news with them and others.

If Paul's audience, having already placed faith in Christ, make the wrong choice now, they will render Paul's work to have been wasted. It will be as if he had never preached. The stakes are indeed high in the choice the Galatians must make!

*What Do You Think?*

What steps can you take to ensure that the work of your spiritual mentors will not be wasted?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In the self-discipline of memory recall

In modeling aspects of the mentor's lifestyle

In becoming a mentor in turn

Other

**II. Uncertain Status**

(Galatians 4:12-16)

**A. Welcomed in the Past (vv. 12-14)**

**12a. I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you.**

Persuasion by logic is one thing, and persuasion by example is another. It is to the latter that Paul now turns as he exhorts the Galatians to *become like* him.

His personal example is that of one whose full faith in Christ has resulted in liberation from the strictures of the Law of Moses. In bringing the gospel's message of liberation to the Galatians, Paul had not parked himself in some seat of authority and insisted people meet various conditions before he would speak with them. Rather, he became as much like the Galatians as

possible (*I became like you*) as he sought them out to tell of Jesus. Paul explains this evangelistic principle in more depth in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. As Paul has accepted fully God's freedom by faith in Jesus, so should the Galatians. They should not listen to false teachers who try to load on additional requirements such as circumcision.

**12b, 13. You did me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you,**

Paul refers to a specific experience of weakness when he preached among the Galatians. This passage, like 2 Corinthians 12:7, where Paul mentions "a thorn in [his] flesh," raises questions about his physical condition. Does his mention of *an illness* indicate that he suffers from some chronic condition? Some have suggested that if Paul is writing to the southern Galatian region after his first missionary journey, then he may be referring to a case of malaria. Such a journey would have taken him through a mosquito-infested region where malaria could have been a danger. Others propose lingering effects from the stoning recorded in Acts 14:19. Yet another proposal is that of an eye disorder, which could be supported by Galatians 4:15; 6:11. Though we do not know the specifics, we do know that Paul experienced some illness while he *first preached the gospel* in Galatia.

**14. and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.**

The result of Paul's humble approach was to be welcomed by the Galatians. In calling his illness *a trial*, Paul is referring to an occasion of testing. Paul speaks with warm exaggeration of the welcome he received from the Galatians during that testing, comparing their openness to the reception of a supernatural messenger from God. Even more, the Galatians had received Paul as if he were *Christ Jesus himself!* (We assume the welcome did not cross the line into being worship, as in Acts 14:11-18.)

Being now reminded of their joyous reception of the gospel, why would the Galatians even think about giving up the freedom they received in that wonderful moment?

**B. Doubted in the Present (vv. 15, 16)**

**15. Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.**

If the Galatians had received Paul so warmly despite his infirmity, why do they not extend to him the same blessing now? Paul urges the readers to think carefully about what he has meant and should mean to them as the messenger of freedom in Christ. Do the advocates of circumcision add



anything to what the Galatians have already received? Certainly not! Adding circumcision actually subtracts from the freedom they have received in the gospel.

The Galatians were at one time ready to make even the extreme sacrifice of their own eyes on Paul's behalf, because they recognized that he preached the message of true freedom. Why the change in attitude?

*What Do You Think?*

What sacrificial acts have you seen on the part of fellow Christians? How do these influence you to do likewise?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In making plans (2 Corinthians 1:15-17; etc.)

In changing a practice (Romans 14:21; etc.)

In monetary giving (2 Corinthians 8:1-4; etc.)

Other

**16. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?**

Paul challenges the Galatians to decide where God's truth lies. Is Christ the fulfillment of what God promised Israel in the law, or is the law the means by which Gentiles join Israel in Christ? Does God bring his promised blessing to the world by receiving people of many nations through Christ, or by making them one nation through circumcision? If the latter are true in these two sets of questions, then Paul has indeed become the Galatians' enemy, for he has preached something false to them. But their entire experience of Paul and of the gospel should indicate the opposite.

***SECOND IMPRESSIONS***

*You never get a second chance to make a good first impression!*

The first-second logic of this axiom is airtight. Yet too often we draw wrong conclusions about people because of overreliance on first impressions. Later we may admit to ourselves that our negative first impression was because the other person reminds us of someone we do not like. Perhaps our negative impression was based on something minor, such as the other's use of filler phrases ("you know," "basically," "like," etc.) when speaking.

With the passage of time, however, we may discover the unfairly evaluated person to be "growing on us." We may realize that he or she has qualities that far outweigh whatever caused our initial dislike. The reverse may also be true at times. We may come to regret having formed a business partnership with someone if that partnership was the result of little more than initial positive vibes regarding his or her professional demeanor.

The Galatians accepted Paul warmly when he first brought the gospel. But their relationship with him cooled when his message was challenged by false teachers. Perhaps the Galatians relied too much on first impressions. Paul's

letter to the Galatians is, in effect, an invitation to put both Paul and his opponents under the microscope of second, third, and fourth impressions. If they do, only Paul will pass inspection. Anyone can make truth *claims*, but few can pass truth *tests*.—C. R. B.

### III. Misplaced Eagerness

(Galatians 4:17-20)

#### A. Harmful Enthusiasm (v. 17)

**17. Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them.**

Those who advocate that the Galatian Christians be circumcised are quite enthusiastic. Their message is not complicated: take a painful but permanent step to truly become God's person.

As appealing as such a *zealous* message is, Paul warns that it is not for the good. Whether these teachers realize it or not, their teaching will *alienate*, or separate, the Galatians not merely from Paul himself but from God's people as a whole. To promote circumcision as a necessary religious rite is to reject the sufficiency of Jesus as the one who reconciles people and God. What Paul writes of unbelieving Israel in his letter to the Romans applies to the false teachers in Galatia: "They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Romans 10:2).

#### B. Healthy Zeal (v. 18)

**18. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you.**

Only one kind of enthusiasm is worthwhile: that of constant dedication to what is *good*. Of course, the good news of Jesus is the greatest good thing. The Galatians need to remember their initial enthusiasm for the gospel. The aim is not simply to recapture the emotion of that time but to refocus on the message that they received, remaining committed to its truth regardless. The Galatians demonstrated that enthusiasm when Paul was present. Now they need to do the same in his absence. God has provided them with what they need to remain faithful, whether or not Paul is present for their support.

*What Do You Think?*

What steps can you take to ensure that your zeal for Christ has scriptural truth as its basis?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Considering positive biblical precepts and examples (John 2:17; Romans 12:11; 2 Corinthians 7:7; 8:10-12; etc.)

Considering negative biblical precepts and examples (Ecclesiastes 7:16, 17; Romans 10:2; Philippians 3:6; etc.)

### **C. Heartfelt Longing (vv. 19, 20)**

#### **19. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,**

The expression *my dear children* stresses the close bond that Paul has with those who have come to faith through his ministry (compare 1 Corinthians 4:14, 15; etc.). Here he carries that figure of speech in a special direction. Paul's efforts in preaching to the Galatians, combined with the suffering that he experienced through his physical malady and otherwise, had been like labor pains that yielded the Galatian Christians' birth into God's family through faith in Christ.

Now the Galatian Christians are in a struggle to hold to that faith. To receive circumcision on the terms offered them would be to say that Christ was not enough to bring them into God's people. Paul's struggle to demonstrate this is like a second set of labor pains to him. When his desire that *Christ be formed in* them is accomplished, their lives will be centered on and governed by the Savior, not the law's requirement for circumcision. His willingness to undergo such a struggle demonstrates the depth of his conviction about the sufficiency of the gospel and the extent of his commitment to them.

#### **20. how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!**

Paul's letter to the Galatians represents his additional "pains of childbirth" on their behalf. But better still would be another personal visit. The goal of such a visit would be for Paul to be able to change his tone of voice to be softer than that of the letter. That could happen if face-to-face interaction reveals or results in the Galatians' rejection of the false teaching and teachers in view. Whether Paul ever has the opportunity to make this personal visit depends on when this letter is dated.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Subtraction by Addition**

We may look back on the Galatians' situation with bemusement. Why was circumcision so attractive to them? Why would they consider adding such a thing to their faith in Christ?

Those questions should make us ponder what we ourselves might add to faith in Christ as we consider what makes us God's people. In every place and age, some have sought to add to the gospel in ways that ultimately result in diminishing the freedom the gospel gives. If we are to be truly free in Christ, then he and he alone must be the object of our trust.

### **B. Prayer**

Father, may we depend utterly on what your Son has done to free us from sin. Teach us to rely on him alone. We pray this in his name. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

Adding requirements to the gospel always results in subtracting from the gospel.

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