

The Anguish of a Father

Galatians 4:8-20

Paul does something as he writes to the Galatians that I would never dare to do. It is an amazing thing for any man to do. He compares himself to a woman giving birth to a baby, a woman in labor. And in verse 19, he refers to “the anguish of childbirth,” what we appropriately call labor. Obviously, he never had that experience himself, but he knows what it means. A woman’s anguish in labor is the result of the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, for the curse given to the woman is to render painful her most natural and fundamental work unique to her as a woman.

Gen. 3:16 “To the woman he said, I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.”

So in his ministry to these Galatian churches, Paul feels labor of childbirth.” And the benefit of that illustration is that there perhaps no better description of a painful experience that has, as its goal, one of the happiest and most exhilarating occasions in a person’s life. And so the Scriptures use childbirth to illustrate a painful struggle that is intended to accomplish something very, very good. So when Jesus explained to his disciples that he would be going away from them, in death, only to be later raised from the dead, he said to them,

John 16:20 “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. 21 When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. 22 So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

So the image is one of deep struggle with the goal of the great joy. And that is how Paul describes his own experience in this very personal account that is before us this afternoon.

We have reached something of a climax in this book. The doctrinal emphasis upon justification by faith alone has been established, and the practical application of that has been emphasized, namely our freedom from those things which Paul calls “the weak and beggarly elements.” Another translation has “elementary principles of the world.” Freedom from worldly, man-made traditions. And, as we’ve seen the last two sermons, freedom to be received and accepted by God as our Father, Abba, without the fear of rejection or condemnation. And without the need to earn that position before God by the efforts of our own works.

v.4-7

So as we progress through this book, today’s text is autobiographical. It is personal. And Paul expresses this deep anguish he feels for the people. Though the illustration is one of a woman in childbirth, a mother, I would label Paul’s emotion the anguish of a father. The Apostle has the courage and self-awareness to compare himself to both a father and a mother. That relationship is further explained in,

1 Thes. 2:7 “But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. 8 So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us...11 For you know how, like a father with his children, 12 we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

So, as father and mother, Paul has,

I. A CHALLENGING QUESTION FOR TRUE BELIEVERS.

The question summarizes and captures the gist of the past several sermons.

v.9

I appreciate how he defines a Christian, not as those who have “come to know God” but rather as those who are “known by God.” I appreciate that passive definition, for salvation is not something we accomplish. Being born again is not something that you do. And so the crucial distinction is not so much that you “know God” but that “God knows you.”

Paul’s point is that with that relationship, as those who are known by God, which is to say, loved by God, known by God as beloved children, with the freedom and blessing of that relationship by which we call God Abba, Father, “How can you turn back again to the “the weak and beggarly elements?” In other words, “Why are you making yourselves slaves again to those traditions of the world.”

Why are you going back to slavery, you who have been given freedom in Christ? Why are you submitting to the rules and regulations of the Old Covenant ceremonial law, such as circumcision? Why are you submitting to the bondage of observing “days and months and seasons and years?” Why are you using those external, ceremonial regulations to define a relationship with God, as if by observing them you can earn and achieve and maintain that relationship?

All of those things were part of the Jewish religion before Jesus came, because all of them were used by God to lead you to Christ. All of those regulations were used to prepare you for Jesus, to teach you about Jesus, but now you have Jesus!

v.3-5

So I leave that challenging question before you this afternoon. “How can you turn back again to “the weak and beggarly elements of the world, to which you desire again to be in bondage?” The question, of course, is an admonition not to do so! And the first step to avoid putting yourself again under that bondage is,

A. The need to realize your freedom in Christ.

That is the emphasis Paul keeps repeating. Christian freedom, and by contrast, the slavery you lived under before you became a Christian.

v.8

So when you were not a Christian, you were enslaved. You were enslaved by the law which both made you feel guilty with no provision for the forgiveness of your sins, and enslaved you to your own native sinfulness which left you unable to keep the law in the first place. So there you were, enslaved to your sin and enslaved to the requirement to keep the law in order to be saved. Hopeless on both accounts.

Thus the starting point for the Christian life is this sense of freedom. This awareness of freedom. Your own personal realization of freedom. On both fronts. First, you are freed from the dominion and slavery of sin because the power of God is now at work within you. And you are free from the condemnation of the law because Jesus Christ laid down his life as the atoning sacrifice for your sins. Thus, as we studied the last two sermons, your freedom is defined by your relationship to God as children, beloved children.

John 8:36 “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

So, according to the words of our Westminster Confession of

Faith, our freedom includes our “free access to God, and [our] yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind.”

With that realization of freedom comes...

B. The need to realize your temptation to return to slavery.

v.9

The “weak and beggarly elements” are, I believe, most clearly understood as the simple, straightforward requirements of the whole the law of Moses, especially as related to worship. They are the whole system of external observances to the law imposed upon the people of Israel in the Old Covenant. The ceremonial law, as we often identify it.

Literally the word has reference to the letters of the alphabet. The focus of the teaching given to a very young child just learning to read. You learn the elemental principles, the abc’s. It is where 3, 4 and 5 year old children begin. When you begin to learn math, the elemental principles are those basic math facts that all children must learn. $2 + 2 = 4$. $2 + 3 = 5$. And so on.

The people of Israel were enslaved to those elementary principles of the ceremonial law. For example, they had to have a priest to offer sacrifices for them. The blood of the animal sacrifices had to be shed. The whole work of the priesthood had to be accomplished, year after year. They had to attend the ceremonial feasts. There were dietary regulations. Clothing regulations. Necessary procedures for cleansing and purifications. They had to do them all. And that is what it means when Paul says that they were “under the law.”

And we have the temptation to return to such external, ceremonial regulations. The examples are given.

v.10

Those feast days were crucial for Old Testament believers, living under law before Christ. They pointed to Christ and prepared the way for Christ. And now, they are done away with. The whole of the outward elements of temple worship are abolished, along with the special days and seasons.

But we are still tempted, aren’t we? As if Easter were a more holy day than any other Lord’s Day. As if giving up eating meat for lent is a sign of spiritual advancement. As if going to church on Christmas and Easter is sufficient to satisfy our duty to worship God today.

And we are tempted to be enslaved by our own worldly rituals and traditions as well. A dress code for coming to church. Prohibitions of things which God doesn’t prohibit, as if by abstaining you are accomplishing your own righteousness. Even traditions in our own expectations of church life. Activities and programs. The point is that you need to realize that that temptation comes to you in your own experience.

Knowing that, Paul gets very personal, and defines,

II. A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP.

And in that relationship, he gives the people of Galatia an admonition. A personal admonition.

A. Become as I am.

v.12

What does that mean? I believe the context clearly refers to

Paul's freedom. Freedom to eat with Gentiles. Freedom to associate with the uncircumcised believers. Freedom to take part in anything which the Lord hasn't forbidden. Freedom to worship without the external trappings of the Old Covenant ceremonial system. Freedom to address God as Abba, Father. Freedom to know, and believe, and to feel in the very depths of your soul, that God forgives you your sin through faith in Jesus. Free from the bondage of having to perform some outward regulations imposed by men.

Paul is urging the Galatians to live out their freedom, and I urge the very same thing to you. Beware of the temptations of human tradition. Beware of the trappings we add to what the Bible requires of us. Beware of assuming that someone who might disagree with your traditions ought to be shunned, their friendship and fellowship rejected. And beloved, those things can easily happen among us.

Become as I am, Paul is willing to say, as I live out the freedom I have in Jesus Christ. Now, before he expresses his deep anguish for the people, he deepens his pastoral relationship with them with a personal connection. And so he describes what could simply be called,

B. The honorable response to a gospel minister.

Just look at how he describes his relationship to them, admitting his own physical limitations.

v.13-14

They received him as a minister of God. Rather than despising him, they accepted God's hand in providing him. And Paul knows the depths of their love for him, and appreciates it.

v.15

Calvin has something very useful to say at this point, "In this light every true minister of Christ ought to be regarded. As God employs the services of angels for communicating to us his favors, so godly teachers are divinely raised up to administer to us the most excellent of all blessings, the doctrine of eternal salvation. Not without good reason are they, by whose hands God dispenses to us such a treasure, compared to angels: for they too are the messengers of God, by whose mouth God speaks to us."

Our own Book of Church Order reflects this idea, by including in the installation of a minister of the gospel this promise made by the people of the congregation, "Do you promise to receive the word of truth from his mouth with meekness and love?" Surely the people of Galatia would have answered, "Yes." Certainly, and surely. And Paul knew it. "You did not scorn or despise me, but receive me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus." He was the very representative of Jesus himself, to speak to the people of God on behalf of God.

Such an honorable response to a gospel minister is necessary and crucial for the health and life of any church, and that question asked of every OPC congregation upon the installation of every OPC minister has such importance. It is the basis upon which I am able to effectively preach to you even today. Not that I have any natural eloquence or ability to be persuasive in my own words or wisdom, but that I proclaim and expound to you the word of God, so that your faith would not depend upon me at all but upon that Word I preach. And so I recall the promise you made to me when I was installed nearly four years ago now, a promise of great importance, "Do you promise to receive the word of truth from his mouth with meekness and love?"

Even with that honor, Paul was in deep anguish for these people. He speaks directly and frankly. There is no flattery, but

no distance either. He does not keep himself distant or separated from the people by speaking in platitudes. Nor does he hide his concerns. Just listen to these words of...

III. AN ANGUISHED APPEAL FROM AN INTENSE PASTOR. v.20

He wishes the situation were different. Be it isn't. His burden for the people is great, and I know what that burden is myself. For I read what God says in Heb. 13:17, for I am responsible to for "keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." I am help accountable to God not for my own popularity, but for the care and oversight of your souls. In that context, I am always conscious of what Paul says to the Ephesian elders in,

Acts 20:28 "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."

So it is that the Holy Spirit has made me an overseer, the Holy Spirit has given me the responsibility to care for the church of God, for people whom Jesus purchased with his own blood. And so I understand Paul's anguish, expressed in verse 11 as,

A. The anguish of the fear of labor done in vain.

It is the anguish the people of Galatia would return again to the slavery of "the weak and beggarly elements." That they would give up their freedom and be devoted to ceremonial regulations and human traditions. And if that happened, no matter how successful and popular they might have become as a church, Paul would have judged his labor to be in vain.

Sadly, there were obviously people in Galatia who didn't

receive the word Paul preached with meekness and love. Paul experienced,

B. The anguish of becoming an enemy by teaching the truth. v.16

The pastorate is no place for anyone longing to be a people-pleaser, for speaking the truth in love creates occasions for a faithful minister of the gospel to become an enemy. Those words of verse 16 are painful for me, for I have known the pain of that experience. I have known the choice, do I remain silent in the face of deep personal, pastoral concerns in order to preserve the closeness of a friendly relationship, or do I speak the truth in love even at the risk of becoming an enemy?

That is a grievous choice to make, but one which in conscience has to be made. There are times when a minister of the gospel becomes an enemy, as it were, to some people, by telling them the truth. I have known that anguish, and I have known those tears. I continue to know the very experience which Paul describes, the anguish of a pastor who so loves his people that he longs for them nothing less than the fullness of spiritual maturity. So we come back to verse 19 where Paul expresses,

C. The anguish involved in seeking the spiritual maturity of others. v.19

His personal testimony of feeling the anguish of a woman in labor points to the child which he seeks to be born. He describes the child to come from the fruit of his labor pains as one in whom Christ is formed! Isn't that a glorious description. He compares himself to a woman giving birth, and he describes the newborn baby as one in whom Christ is formed. One who is conformed to

the image of Jesus himself. That is the meaning of my words, spiritual maturity.

The goal of a pastor is not prosperity nor popularity. His success is not measured by attendance records or the size of the church budget. No, the anguish under which any faithful pastor labors is the anguish of longing for nothing other than the spiritual maturity of those precious sheep from whom Jesus died, whose souls are entrusted to his own care and oversight. That is an anguish I have felt very, very deeply in the years I have now labored here.

And I retain the very goal that Paul identifies, that Christ would be formed in you. That Christ would be formed in us as a church. I retain that optimism and that expectation that God will bless the labor and ministry of His word, and I see that blessing in so many of you.

And so the labor of the pastors and teachers in Christ's church, according to Ephesians 4, is,

Eph. 4:12 "...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

Again, let me read some very wise words of commentary by

John Calvin, "This is a remarkable passage for illustrating the efficacy of the Christian ministry. True, we are "born of God," but, because he employs a minister and preaching as his instruments for that purpose, he is pleased to ascribe to them that work which Himself performs, through the power of his Spirit, in cooperation with the labors of man. Let us always attend to this distinction, that, when a minister is contrasted with God, he is nothing, and can do nothing, and is utterly useless; but, because the Holy Spirit works efficaciously by means of him, he comes to be regarded and praised as an agent. Still, it is not what he can do in himself, or apart from God, but what God does by him, that is there described. If ministers wish to do anything, let them labor to form Christ, not to form themselves, in their hearers. The writer is now so oppressed with grief, that he almost faints from exhaustion without completing his sentence."

And so beloved, may this common goal be among us as a church. It is a goal that moves and motivates me in every part of my ministry. And it is a goal that must be shared by us all. That goal is simply that Christ be formed in you; that you be conformed to the image of Christ and made like him more and more and in every way.

As for me, I will measure my ministry by that standard, that Christ be formed in you. I long for nothing less, and in that process, I understand what the apostle says and what he means in,

v.19 "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you."

And as any expectant mother would say, what a glorious child it will be!