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From Joyless Religion, to Exciting Adventure
Galatians 4:8-20
January 18th, 2015, Jeff Germs
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Galatians 4:8–20 (ESV)

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. 9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years!

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11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. 12 Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. 13 You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, 14 and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

[4]

15 What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. 16 Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? 17 They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. 18 It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, 19 my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! 20 I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

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It's important that we always remind ourselves of the context when we are reading Scripture so that we don't read something into it that's not there. Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians because of a crisis in the churches. The church had its start initially because of Paul's missionary work. They had received the Gospel of Jesus that gives freedom. Paul left the church to do some more missionary work. In a short time the church had been infiltrated by false teachers who were attempting to turn the hearts of the Galatian believers away from the true gospel that offers salvation and righteousness by grace, through faith in Christ alone, resulting in freedom. The Judaizers, as they were called, were teaching that in order to be accepted by God, the Gentiles would have to become religious Jews and follow the Mosaic Law.

Paul has not minced his words at all. He has been very forthright at times. As a matter of fact, some of the things he said bordered on being downright insulting.

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Galatians 1:6 (ESV)

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

How would you like someone to say something like that to you? Or how about this next one?

[7]

Galatians 3:1 (ESV)

1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.

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Galatians 3:3 (ESV)

3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

What he was saying was, "ARE YOU NUTS?!!! ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MINDS?!!! How can you, after having tasted the freedom of Christ, wrap chains around yourselves and go back to living your life by rules. Rules, regulations, and law do not bring life. Only power that comes from faith in Christ brings life.

Well, Paul, from the beginning of the letter until now, uses arguments from law, theology, biblical history, and from personal anecdotes to persuade the Galatian believers to turn back to Christ, to not give up on the

freedom he bought for them. He's now finished with those more cerebral arguments, and moves to a more emotional argument.

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Galatians 4:8–20 (ESV)

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

So, apparently, most of the Galatian believers were Gentiles (non-Jews) who had worshipped a plurality of gods before they came to Christ. They were idol worshippers. They worshipped things made by human hands out of stone and wood. And Paul said those things are inanimate objects that have no power in them at all. What kind of logic is it to worship something that you make? The very fact that you created it should be a clue that it is lesser than you and not worthy of worship. It makes more sense that the created thing would worship the creator.

God, through the prophet Isaiah, spoke about this concerning the hearts of his people who were turning to idolatry in the Old Testament times.

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Isaiah 44:12–20 (ESV)

¹² The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. ¹³ The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house.

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¹⁴ He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵ Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. ¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!"

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¹⁷ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!" ¹⁸ They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. ¹⁹ No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"

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²⁰ He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

When you look at like this it seems ridiculous, doesn't it? Why would someone expect that something they made with their own hands could be the answer to the deep questions of life? But, the thing about idolatry is the worshipper gets so wrapped up in the object of their worship that they project something more onto it than what it was meant for.

We see this all the time in our contemporary world. And I'm not just talking about our religiously pluralistic society in Canada. We have all kinds of religions represented in Canada and many of them worship manmade idols. That is obvious to us. I'm talking about other idols that we have. We worship things we shouldn't worship.

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Our society worships fame: athletes, movie stars, and singers. Actually, we only worship them when they are up. When they fall, we see that they are merely mortal and then we diss them. You can probably think of a few names right now of people who had been worshipped by the general public until they did something stupid and then they became fallen stars to mock and ridicule. They are just people, created by God and not to be worshipped.

We worship lots of things besides fame, don't we? Wealth, beauty, youth, certain careers, houses, cars,

clothes, technology, intellect, prestige, sports, the environment. We can even hold our theology up to be more important than God, or even being a good person. We want something other than God to worship. Anything that we put ahead of God is idolatry. It could be a person, a thing, a job, or even a ministry. **When we put created things ahead of the one true living God we get enslaved by them.** They take over. It clouds our thinking so that our economy becomes twisted. We no longer know what is really important.

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At the heart of idolatry is the belief that our lives can have meaning without God. That was what Satan tempted Adam and Eve with in the garden. “Did God really say...?” In other words, “you don’t need God. You can be your own god. You can have meaning and purpose without him.” That is a blatant lie from the enemy of our souls. When we try to derive meaning from anything other than our relationship to Christ we are practicing idolatry.

G.K. Beale, in his book, *We Become What We Worship*, said this;

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What we revere, we resemble, either for ruin or restoration. To commit ourselves to some part of the creation more than the Creator is idolatry. And when we worship something in creation, we become like it, as spiritually lifeless and insensitive to God as a piece of wood, rock, or stone.¹

So, Paul said the Galatian Christians had been enslaved by idols, and then they met Jesus and found freedom and real life.

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⁹ But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years!

Don’t miss this. There is something really important here. Paul said that before Christ, the Galatians were pagan idol worshippers. Now, he says if they join the Judaizers in their religiosity they are going back again to pagan idol worship. Did you catch that?

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From paganism to Judaism did not bring them closer to God. In other words, just because someone believes in god, even if it’s supposedly the god of the Old Testament doesn’t mean that they are saved. Just because someone tries to live a good life and obey what they think are the rules of the Bible doesn’t bring them any closer to God. The only way that we can be saved is by receiving the free gift of grace through faith in Christ’s finished work on the cross.

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As we continue on we see Paul’s emotions coming into play.

¹¹ I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

I can remember my parents saying things like that to me when I was a kid. Now, I find this very hard to believe, and I’m sure you will too, but according to my parents, I was a very stubborn and obstinate boy right from before I could walk or talk. They told me that, as a baby, I wouldn’t go to sleep — unless it was my idea — even if I was dead tired. They would lay me down in my crib, and I would sit up and force my eyes open. And they would lay me back down again, and back up I would come forcing my self to stay awake and I would sit there until my eyes closed and I fell over. And that stubbornness didn’t lessen as I grew older — so they say. I can remember times when my parents would say with a deep sense of frustration and sadness, with head in hands, “Jeff, my son, where did we go wrong?”

That’s sort of what Paul is feeling here. He brought the Galatians to Christ. They were his spiritual children. He walked with them as they matured. And now it seems like it was all for nothing. **¹¹ I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.**

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¹² Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.

Remember that most of the believers in the Galatian churches were Gentiles. Paul said that he became like them, that is, he abandoned the Mosaic Law as the way to get himself right with God and put his faith in Christ.

¹ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship* (InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 15 & 307

And now, they have believed the lie of the false teachers that they need to turn to the law, so Paul begs them to turn back to Christ. ***“I entreat you, become as I am”***. Paul said a similar thing to the believers in Corinth.

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1 Corinthians 11:1 (ESV)

1 Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

How many of you would dare to say that to someone? I wish I could honestly say that I have followed Christ the way Paul did, so CRBC, follow me. I really wish, as I look back on my life, that there weren't so many things to be ashamed of, that there weren't so many ways I failed Christ, and people I hurt because of my immaturity. But, unfortunately, there are. Like you, I am a train wreck. There is no one here who can say, I have it together enough that you should follow me.

I am in process just like you. I am growing in the image of Christ, and I am not the same man I was a year ago, and one year from now, like you, I will not be the same person I am today. There is a big difference between Paul and me, and Paul, and you. He said this with apostolic authority. We can't do that. What we can do though is walk with Jesus. We are going to stumble along. None of us will “arrive” on this side of heaven, but by God's grace he is changing us little by little into better “usses” as we cooperate with him. That's where our hope lies. We need to learn be ok with not being ok.

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Paul continues, ***“You did me no wrong.”*** In other words, he was not asking them to turn back to do him a favour, or as if they had hurt his feelings by not believing the Gospel. He is begging them, for their own sake, for the sake of their souls, to turn away from the law and back to Christ.

[23]

13 You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, 14 and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

Apparently, Paul had some sort of sickness or disease that led to the Galatians caring for him and gave him opportunity to first share the gospel with them. There's a lot of speculation as to what the illness was. I think it was probably some kind of eye problem left over from his Damascus Road experience with Jesus. Remember, he was blinded by a light from which he heard the voice of Jesus. His sight was later restored, but there could have been some residual problems. The reason I say that is because of what Paul says in verse 15.

[24]

15 What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.

Some translations say, “What happened to your joy?” What happened to the freedom you experienced? You loved me and cared for me. What happened to that?

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16 Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? 17 They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. 18 It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, 19 my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! 20 I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

There is so much emotion in this last appeal. If you've ever attempted to speak truth to someone and they get angry at you, you can sort of understand what Paul is feeling here. He is baffled by how they could fall for the flattery and lies these Judaizers fed them.

Now, I don't think Paul had experienced childbirth firsthand, but he could likely imagine that it is quite a painful experience, and that the end of the pain brings joy. For those of you who are mothers, you know what Paul is talking about. You brought your children into the world through the painful experience of childbirth. I would imagine, though, once you held your baby in your arms for the first time you didn't regret it. The pain was likely forgotten and replaced with the joy that the little one brought as you cuddled her.

But, if you have older children, you can probably think of times as your kids were growing up that you experienced a deeper kind of pain. Maybe you saw your kids make some poor decisions and you knew they

were going to be hurt. And it pained you so much to watch because you thought you had trained them better. You can understand well the perplexity that Paul is expressing here. His concern wasn't for his reputation, as their spiritual parent, but for their well-being.

Paul's hope in writing this letter was that he would be able to win his Galatian children back to Christ. His goal was that there would be a transformation in their hearts; that the image of Christ would continue to be formed in them. He knew from personal experience that the law could not do that. It has no inherent power. They would need to avail themselves of the power of the Holy Spirit, which was only available by grace, through faith in Christ alone. Paul was not giving up hope that they would see the light and turn.

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As I was studying this passage I couldn't help but wonder what was going through the minds of the Galatians, and Paul. They could all have seen themselves as colossal failures. Paul, himself, could have wallowed in a puddle of muck and mire of self-pity thinking he hadn't finished well with the Galatians. He could have second-guessed himself. He could have asked a whole bunch of "if-onlys." "If only I didn't leave Galatia so soon. If only I had been more clear in my teaching." "If only I had taught more passionately."

And the Galatians, after reading this letter, I'm sure would have been tempted to do their own wallowing in shame for not keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus.

I took a leadership course a couple years ago. There were ten of us in the class that met four times a year for two and a half days of intense teaching and interaction. The last thing we did on one Friday morning was to discuss the idea of spiritual direction. How do you come alongside someone and ask them questions that keep them attentive to how God is working in their lives? We were told to break up into pairs and practice.

I asked my partner a question and we had some very good discussion about how God had changed her picture of him over the last year, and especially how her idea of how God viewed her had changed. Through tears she recounted how her narrative had changed drastically from a God to be dreaded and who was distant and hard to reach, to a God who liked to be with her and actually pursues her. It was wonderful to listen to her.

And then it was her turn to ask me a question. She said that she wasn't very good at asking questions and didn't know what to ask, so I suggested that we just be quiet and ask God what he would have her ask me. And so we did. We both closed our eyes and listened in silence for a couple of minutes.

And then she broke the silence with this question: "Think of the natural physical realm. Choose an image from nature – either flora or fauna – that portrays your journey since the beginning of our leadership course last year and describe it to me."

Well, the first thing that came to my mind was a scenario back about fifteen years ago at a church we were at in Calgary. We were hiring a new youth pastor and the congregation was given a chance to ask the candidate some questions. One guy stood up and asked this, "If you were a flower, what kind of flower would you be?" I thought, what kind of flaky question is that? I thought the guy must have been on drugs or something.

Anyway, she asked me this question, and I thought the same thing. What kind of question is that? But, immediately an image popped into my mind and I blurted out, "Compost." I have no idea where it came from.

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Why compost? Ruth and I used to compost when we had a garden. And to me compost is leftover food that nobody wants, except for the worms and rats. It's garbage. Thanks for the image God. So, I'm garbage. Nice!

And then all of a sudden I sensed the Spirit of Jesus come over me and I started to weep uncontrollably. No joke. I felt a little silly. But as soon as I gained my composure I started to flesh it out. All of my past failures. All the ways I have let people down. All the ways I have failed God. All my disappointments, all the ways I have been hurt by others, all my shortcomings, the ways I think I don't measure up as a man, brother, son, uncle, husband, pastor, and friend, all of the garbage in my life, the things that I feel the most shame about, those are the very things God wants to use for something good, to bring him glory.

Composting is a process we never did master. We sort of understand the science of it, but we have yet to master the art. If composting is done right it will become fertile soil with lots of nutrients to help a garden grow. All of that leftover food and yard trimmings is made into something that brings life and nourishment.

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You know, that is what God wants to do with each of us. It's so easy to look at our failures and shortcomings and wallow in the muck and mire of self-pity and shame. But God doesn't want us to do that, because the very things that cause us the most shame and pain and misery God wants to use as fertilizer. They first help us grow, and then he will use that same pain to help others grow. God never wastes our pain.

We need to let go of our ways of deriving purpose in our lives. We need to surrender the "idols" we worship, the things we think give us meaning and justify our existence and allow the Spirit of Jesus to take the garbage of our lives and turn it into something beautiful that he can use to bring life to others. That's what God wants to do with us. It's painful while we are going through it, but if we persevere God can take all that bad stuff and make it into something beautiful that he can use to bring life to others.

What an amazing God we have.



**Galatians: Learning to Live in the Freedom of Christ
From Joyless Religion to Exciting Adventure**

Galatians 4:8-20

Week of January 18th, 2015

Objective of this study: To bring to light the ways we replace relationship with idolatry and legalism and get a picture of God's better way.

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes of silence have someone interrupt the silence and read **Isaiah 61:1-3, 7** meditatively to the group. Then pause for about a minute and let it sink in.
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

Do you or do you not like gardening? Share some biggest gardening flops or interesting composting stories.

Word (20 - 30 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Galatians 4:8-20
3. In this passage Paul turns from 'head' arguments to 'heart'. Find all references to Paul's emotions, how he expresses his *heart* for the Galatians, his deep care for them. This is an observation question. We want to understand Paul and his message by looking closely at his letter to these people he deeply loved. Pay close attention and observe as much as you can about Paul's heart. Look for words, phrases, etc. that have emotional weight.
4. Why was Paul afraid? What was his fear? (v. 11) What does he liken his 'efforts' (NIV) or his 'labours' (ESV) to? (vv. 19-20)
5. What is his desire, his goal? (v. 19)
6. How does Paul describe the Galatians love for him? (vv. 14-15)
7. There is a lot of family oriented, intimate imagery being used here. Can you relate to the pain expressed in verses 16 and 20?

Work (30 - 40 minutes)

We can try to use our legalism to cover up, or make up for our failure and disasters. God has something far better in mind.

Sermon quote: **“We need to let go of *OUR* ways of deriving purpose in our lives. We need to surrender the “idols” we worship, the things we think give us meaning and justify our existence and allow the Spirit of Jesus to take the garbage of our lives and turn it into something beautiful that he can use to bring life to others. That’s what God wants to do with us. It’s painful while we are going through it, but if we persevere God can take all that bad stuff and make it into something beautiful that he can use to bring life to others.”**

1. What kinds of things do we tend to idolize? How does legalism relate to idolatry?
2. How are idolatry and legalism both used to ease the pain of our shortcomings, or as replacements for the real thing God has called us to in relationship with him and with each other?

Sermon quote: **“It’s so easy to look at our failures and shortcomings and wallow in the muck and mire of self-pity and shame. But God doesn’t want us to do that, because the very things that cause us the most shame and pain and misery God wants to use as fertilizer. They first help us grow, and then he will use that same pain to help others grow. God never wastes our pain.”**

3. Read Isaiah 61:1-3, 7. How does this relate to the above sermon quote?
4. Read Isaiah 61:1-3, 7 again, meditatively, taking note of the contrasts, the 'insteads'. Which 'instead' gives you the most hope? Why?
5. Refer to the sermon quote again. How has God done this in your life?