

FROM SONSHIP TO SLAVERY  
PART 2

TEXT: GALATIANS 4:8-11

February 20, 2011

**INTRO/REVIEW:**

As Paul assessed the dire situation in Galatia, he expresses his fear that his gospel ministry may have been in vain (v. 11). He is almost at a loss for words (ἀποροῦμαι, v. 20) and fears that the Galatians may never have been justified, as evidenced by their desire (θέλετε, v. 9) to follow the religious observances of the Mosaic Covenant as a means for justification. In other words, the Galatians were in imminent danger of turning from sonship to slavery (vv. 8-11).

The essence of Paul's message is: Once you were slaves. Now you are sons. How then can you turn back and desire to be slaves again?

Therefore, to keep the Galatians from falling from sonship to slavery, Paul sets forth 3 aspects of the Galatians' relationship to God that he wants them to remember to show the foolishness of turning back to the law.

First, we saw last week:

I. PAUL REMINDS THE GALATIANS OF WHO THEY WERE: IGNORANT OF GOD, v. 8

If we want to avoid turning from sonship back into slavery, we must remember who we were: ignorant of God (i.e., enslaved idolaters). He writes, "Formerly, *when you did not know God*, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods" (emphasis mine).

Paul is not denying that fact that all men by nature possess a *general knowledge* of God (Rom. 1:19-20). All men, by virtue of having been created possess a general knowledge of God. But here, Paul is emphasizing the fact that before their conversion, the Galatians did not possess a *saving knowledge* of God.

Because of their lack of a saving knowledge of God, Paul says the Galatians were "enslaved to those that by nature are not gods." Ignorance of a saving knowledge of God as announced in the gospel always results in enslaving idolatry. Martin Luther writes, "Whoever falls from the doctrine of justification is ignorant of God and is an idolater" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 395).

Calvin adds that the main inference by Paul is that the Galatians were less excusable for corrupting the gospel than they had formerly been for idolatry (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 122)!

Thus, Paul is perplexed as to why someone who has been delivered from one type enslaving idolatry (paganism) would desire to become enslaved to another (Judaism)! Here we see in v. 8 how easy it is to turn from the gospel and revert back to the Law. There is in the heart of every man a relentless temptation to revert back to self-justification (idolatry). Therefore, to keep us from falling from slavery to sonship, Paul first calls us first to remember who we once were (i.e., ignorant of God).

However, as important as it is to remember who we were, it is not enough. We must also be continually reminded of who we are.

### **LESSON:**

#### II. PAUL REMINDS THE GALATIANS OF WHO THEY ARE: KNOWN BY GOD, v. 9A-B

Look what Paul says, “But now that you have come to know God...” (4:9a).

By drawing a sharp contrast between who the Galatians were before their conversion (τότε, “formerly/then” v. 8) and who they have become after their conversion (νῦν, “now” v. 9), Paul highlights the folly of returning to the Law for justification.

If idolatry (bondage to evil spirits) is due to our ignorance of God, our sonship is due to our knowing of God or better yet our being known by God.

Here Paul gives an insightful description of conversion. In conversion we say no to our idols (repentance) and yes to Christ in faith as He is freely promised to us in the gospel. Thus, repentance (turning from sin) and faith (turning to God) form the two aspects of conversion.

For example, in Acts 14, while ministering in Lystra (a city in the Galatian province), Paul and Barnabas heal a crippled man (vv. 8-10). In response, the priest of Zeus and the Lystran people seek to worship them (vv. 11-13). Paul immediately denounces their idolatry and declares, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, *that you should turn from these vain things to a living God*, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them,” (vv. 14-15, emphasis mine; cf. 1 Thess. 1:9-10).

It is critical to note that the goal of conversion (and the gospel) is to know God. In John 17:3, Jesus prays, “this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

The fundamental problem with man is not his slavery to idols. The gospel doesn’t stop merely at repentance from idols. Idolatry is merely the consequence of a more fundamental problem. The fundamental problem with man is his ignorance of God (i.e., his lack of a saving knowledge of God).

The goal of the gospel is not just to deliver us from the present evil age (1:3). Neither is the goal of the gospel to justify us and thereby deliver us from the curse of the law and eternal judgment (though this is good news! 2:16). The goal of the gospel is not only to grant us redemption and adoption (4:5). The ultimate goal of God in the gospel is to deliver, redeem, justify and adopt us so that we can know Him! The knowledge of God is what keeps us from falling into legalism. It is the antidote to idolatry!

*What then does it mean to know God?*

In v. 9, Paul shows that the knowledge of God consists of two aspects: (1) the believer's knowledge of God (v. 9a); (2) God's knowledge of the believer (v. 9b).

#### A. THE BELIEVER'S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD (V. 9A)

The knowledge Paul is speaking of is not simply an impersonal knowing of facts. Neither is it some secret, unmediated, Gnostic, special, direct knowledge reserved only for the super spiritual believer. Rather, the knowledge Paul is speaking of is a personal, saving knowledge of God as revealed through the gospel. From the context, we see that a saving knowledge of God consists of:

##### 1. A TRINITARIAN KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The Galatians had come to know that God the Father was the author of salvation (redemption and adoption, vv. 4-5). God the Father is as much the Redeemer as the Son is, just in a different role. "God the Father so loved the world that He gave His One and Only Unique Son" (Jn. 3:16). The Galatians knew that God the Father was as intimately involved in the resurrection as was Jesus. For, it was the Father who raised Jesus from the dead (1:1).

Also, the Galatians had come to know the person and work of God the Son (4:4-5; see also 1:1, 4; 2:16). They had come to trust in Christ's resurrection (1:1). They trusted in Christ alone as the only source of deliverance (1:3), justification (2:16), redemption and adoption (4:5).

And, thirdly, the Galatians had come to know the person and work of God the Holy Spirit (4:6). They had come to know that the Holy Spirit is the One who applies and confirms our redemption and adoption (4:6). Through the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, the believer comes to know God as his or her loving, caring, welcoming Father (4:6).

From the foregoing texts, it is critically important to note the Trinitarian aspect of a saving knowledge of God. The ancient formula of the early church was that God does everything "From the Father, in the Son, and by the Spirit." Paul shows us that we are living in light of the gospel that the Father has spoken in His Son through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so any god that isn't known as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (any god that isn't the Trinity) is demonic (an idol/false god). Any god that isn't Father, Son and Holy Spirit is an illusion of satan, intended to disguise the truth of the gospel and draw a person's heart away from a saving knowledge of the true God who is known finally and definitively in the Son.

This brings us to a second aspect of what it means to know God.

## 2. A CHRIST-CENTERED KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

There is no genuine saving knowledge of God outside of Christ. In Acts 4:12, Peter declared, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." God can only be known through Christ. "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known," (Jn. 1:18).

Christ alone is the only way to truly know God. In John 14:6-7a, Jesus says, "<sup>6</sup> Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup> If you had known me, you would have known my Father also...'"

Through the gospel, God rescues us from a condition in which our minds are darkened so that we do not know God and brings us to know God as He is found in Christ (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:18).

Through the gospel, the Galatians (as noted above) had come to receive and rest in the finished work of Christ's redeeming work on the cross as their only source and means of deliverance (1:4), justification (2:16) redemption and adoption (4:5). They had come to trust in Christ's resurrection (1:1).

## 3. A FILIAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the believer is confidently assured of his status as an adopted son (4:6). To know God is to know him as a loving, welcoming, caring Father.

Just like a son or daughter who knows their father and possesses love and affection for him, in the same way a Christian is one who lives with an intimate, personal knowledge of God as his or her Father.

To know God is to know the freedom and joy of having been justified and adopted and received into His eternal favor and to be made an heir of the Father's estate. To be a Christian is to trust in the objective truth of the gospel and thus be confidently assured by the Holy Spirit of the Father's eternal favor (i.e., that he or she is known by God!).

This leads us to the second aspect of the knowledge of God.

## B. GOD'S KNOWLEDGE OF THE BELIEVER (v. 9B)

How did the Galatians (do you) come to a saving knowledge of God? Notice how Paul qualifies the Galatians' knowledge of God. He writes, "But now that you have come to know God, or rather *to be known by God...*" (emphasis mine).

Paul's emphasis does not rest upon the Galatians' action of knowing God but rather upon God's knowing of them! His preference is to describe a Christian not merely as someone who knows God but rather is known by God.

What then does it mean to be known by God?

First, a word about what it is not. The knowledge Paul is speaking of is not God's general, factual knowledge in the sense of knowing everything about everyone (i.e., His omniscience; cf. Ps. 139; 1 Jn. 3:20).

Rather, the idea of being "known by God" is a relational knowledge. Just as the Galatians' knowledge of God was not simply an impersonal, cold, factual knowledge neither is God's knowledge of His people.

1. TO BE KNOWN BY GOD IS TO BE VISITED BY HIM IN MERCY.

Paul's insistence upon God's initiative in salvation destroys legalism. Throughout this letter, Paul has repeatedly emphasized that salvation is based on grace rather than the meritorious works of man. This single phrase in v. 9 (*γνωσθέντες ὑπὸ θεοῦ*) exalts the grace of God and destroys the works of man!

Paul is reminding the Galatians of how they had obtained a saving knowledge of God. They did not obtain it by circumcision (5:2-3, 6) or by observing dietary laws (2:12) or the holy days on the Jewish calendar (4:10).

Contrasting v. 8 with v. 9, Paul says when the Galatians were ignorant of God, enslaved to the worship of idols and thus removed as far as possible from any true knowledge of God, "God," Calvin writes, "visited them in His mercy" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 123).

To be known by God is to be a recipient of mercy/grace. Thus, knowing God is a matter of grace not merit! God's knowing of us precedes our knowing of Him! In conversion, it is true that believers come to know God. But, the reason you and I come to know God is because of God's preceding knowledge of us.

No one had a better knowledge of God's gracious visitation in mercy than Paul. He recounts his amazing conversion in 1:13-16, which testified to the power of God's grace.

Paul says that when he was ignorant of God, enslaved to Judaism and violently seeking to persecute and destroy the church, removed as far as possible from any true knowledge of God (vv. 13-14), God the Father had set him apart before he was born, called him by His grace and was pleased to reveal His Son to him! What amazing grace!

God visited Paul in mercy (poured out His love and affection on him in time) because He had set His affection upon him in eternity past. In a word, God knew him!

So, when Paul says, “you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God,” he is emphasizing the priority of sovereign, undeserved grace. Like the Galatians, our knowing God is a consequence of God’s first knowing us.

Paul’s statement here is similar to the apostle John’s statement in 1 John 4:19, “We love because He first loved us.” Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:3, “if anyone loves God, he is known by God.” We love God because He knows us! We know God because He first knew us!

Were it not for God’s first knowing of us, we would forever remain ignorant of Him. We would eternally wander in blindness, enslaved to the worship of our idols, lost in an endless pursuit of self-justification.

We cannot take credit for any part of our salvation. Salvation from beginning, middle and end is a gracious work of God. None of us deserves to be known by God. In our idolatrous rebellion against Him, we have all completely forfeited any claim on His favor. We are all equally guilty of idolatry, enslaved to our sinful nature, and justly condemned under the curse of God’s law.

We were all just as ignorant of God as Paul and the Galatians. But, the Lord visited us in mercy and determined in grace to know us just as He did Paul and the Galatians. Ultimately, it is not that we know God but that He knew us and visited us in mercy.

## 2. TO BE KNOWN BY GOD IS TO BE RECEIVED BY HIM AS A SON.

John Calvin wrote, “To be known by God...simply means to be counted among His sons,” (quoted in Brian Rosner, “Known by God: The Meaning and Value of a Neglected Biblical Concept,” *TynBul* 59 (2008): 214).

The connection between being known by God and adoption comes from Paul’s preceding discussion on adoption (3:26-4:7). When Paul is speaking of the knowledge of God in v. 9, he has not left the idea of adoption/sonship behind.

For example, in Galatians 4:6, Paul has shown us how the Holy Spirit assures our hearts that God the Father has received us as His adopted sons. To be known by God is to have His Fatherly love and affection set upon us (to be a recipient of His favor), even when our hearts were filled with love and affection for our idols! God’s love and affection is utterly astounding when you realize that He chose to know you based on a perfect knowledge of the worst about you!

When you were a child of wrath, “God” Paul writes, “being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...” (cf. Eph. 2:3-5).

The gospel announces to us that nothing can quench God the Father's determination to eternally know His people. How can I be sure of this? It is because His covenant remains unchanging! God had made a covenant with Abraham (Gal. 3:8-9, 16; cf. Gen. 12:3) and through Christ God's covenantal promise is fulfilled (Gal. 3:16).

God has promised to eternally set His covenant love on His people. In Jeremiah 31:3 God says to His covenant people, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." God's gracious loving favor flows towards us eternally because His covenant is unchanging. Calvin commenting on this verse writes,

...there is no doubt but that God is at this day prepared to secure the salvation of all the godly; for He remains ever the same, and never changes; and He would also have His fidelity and constancy to shine forth in the covenant which He has made with His Church. Since, then, the covenant is inviolable and cannot fail, even were heaven and earth brought into confusion, we ought to feel assured that God will ever be a deliverer to us: how so? because His covenant remains the same; and therefore, His power to deliver us will remain the same (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 10, p. 58).

To be known by God recalls the Hebrew verb, *yada* (יָדָע), where God's knowledge refers to His choosing of someone- the setting of His affection upon someone (see Tom Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 278).

For example, in Genesis 18:19, God says concerning Abraham, "I have chosen (lit. known) him." Out of all the people living in the ancient Mesopotamian world, God set his affection on Abraham to be the recipient of His covenant promise not only to be the Father of the Jewish people but also to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth (18:18).

In Ex. 33:12, 17, God speaks to Moses, "<sup>12</sup> I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight...<sup>17</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

Of Israel, God says, "You only have I chosen (lit. known) of all the families of the earth..." (Amos 3:2). In Jeremiah 1:5, God says of Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I chose you (lit. knew you)..."

Jesus in John 10:14 says, "I am the good shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me..." Paul, in 2 Timothy 2:19 writes, "God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His..."

Thus, the Galatians came to know God in a saving way because He first knew them, (i.e., He graciously set His affection/favor upon them and chose them to be His own sons).

The emphasis always lies in God's acts of grace rather than man's acts of merit. In other words, our obedience is merely a response to His prior affection! The origin of our knowing God is the grace of God in which He set His affection/favor upon us before we

were born (i.e., He knew us!). “On this,” Calvin writes, “depends our calling, our faith, our whole salvation” (*Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 123).

It is in light of God’s incredible, lavish, abounding grace given in the gospel that Paul expresses his utter astonishment at the Galatians turning back to the law after their conversion (cf. 1:6; 4:9, 20). And so he asks in v. 9, “How,” in light of such lavish grace, “can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?”

**REFLECTION:**

To keep from falling from sonship to slavery, we must remember who we are: known by God. In other words, we must have an unremitting immersion in the truth of the gospel, namely that God has graciously set His affection and favor upon me (He has and forever will know me!).

When we live with an assurance of God the Father’s knowing of us (i.e., His covenantal favor), we stop striving for it by what we do and simply rest in it because of what Christ has done for us! Thus, J.I. Packer writes,

“What matters supremely, therefore, is not the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it- the fact that He knows me. I am graven on the palms of His hands. I am never out of His mind. All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me. I know Him because He first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me, or His attention distracted from me, and no moment...when His care falters” (*Knowing God*, p. 42).

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