

# The apostle Paul's work in the congregation of the Galatians

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**Bible Text:** Galatians 4:12-20  
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Congregation, you might remember that the Apostle Paul was critical of the congregation in Galatia, the Galatian congregations. They were falling back into those old patterns of deserving and behaving and by works, to those weak and beggarly elements. It was quite a tone, sometimes quite critical and maybe even harsh and then all of a sudden he changes his tone again and becomes more gentle and personal and warm. He's not just chastising them, he's the pastor. So in those verses, the next verses, 12 through 20, he's talking a very gentle, experiential, warm way about how he feels, and in almost all verses I think, well, except one verse, he speaks of "I," about himself. He's involved, You feel the pastor talking about "I" and "me."

So let's listen to that. Galatians 4:12-20.

12 Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are: ye have not injured me at all. 13 Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. 14 And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. 15 Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me. 16 Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth? 17 They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them. 18 But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you. 19 My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you, 20 I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.

So far.

The Apostle Paul's work, the work in congregations of Galatia. Four points: hard work; secondly, blessed work; in the third place, the purpose of this work; and in the fourth place, the continued work. So Paul's work in the congregation of the Galatians. Hard work, we hope to see it in this piece. Let me show you already in verse 19 about the hard work it is, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth." He compares his work with a

mother delivering a child. Hard work, right? Secondly, blessed work, for example, think of verse 13, "Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus." You received me and you received the Gospel so there is blessed work. He's referring to the powers, what happened. In the third place, the purpose of this work. What is the purpose? You see this, for example, in verse 19, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you." That's kind of the main point, I would say, the main point in this sermon, in this piece. Let Christ be formed in you. And in the fourth place, the continued work. He's not only talking about the past, he's also talking about the present. For example in verse 12, "Brethren, I beseech you," now, today, I beseech you, I ask you, I beg you. He's talking and still working in the present.

Congregation, the Apostle Paul is wise. He knows that and he only chastises the congregations, only is critical to the congregations if he makes them upset, they won't listen anymore, right? But you can only be critical of some like a child or a member, "You, you, you always, you do this," they shut down and they don't listen at all anymore and you go nowhere. You have to use a gentle tone, be firm and yet gentle. And so the Apostle Paul is very gentle now in this piece. "Brethren," he begins. Brethren. He's not against them. He's not their enemy. He is not trying to kill them. He means the best for them.

"Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am." Think about that. Be as I am, "for I am as ye are." How can the Apostle Paul say that? Is he proud, proud saying, "I beseech you, be like I am. I'm the example. I'm good. Just follow my example. I'm such a good example for you, be as I am. For I am as you are." What he means is this, the Apostle Paul says, "I became like you. I became like the Gentiles. I became in a bondage. I became a sinner. I was not a level higher than you but I came down the same level. I was standing next to you. Not above you, next to you. I was on the same level with you. I became as you are. Now be as I am, free. Free because I was in bondage with you before, called that sinner out to be a lost sinner and to be a saved sinner. Be saved by coming to the conclusion you're lost. Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am, free, saved, in the light, for I am as you are." Do you see that he came down to the same level, that he was not exalting himself, he was really humble? Well, this special tone, it would give that to us as pastors, as elders, as deacons, as missionaries sitting next to the people, not on the pulpit but on the pedestal, but a little bit low at their feet. "Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am." He's not proud, he's thankful and he knows that when people come low, the Lord will give them what they are in need of.

So hard work. It's struggle not being able to preach the word of God and yet feeling that you have to compel the people, that you cannot bring the word to the hearts and yet do your utmost. It's quite something. Yes, he compares it to delivering a baby. Hard work. Carrying the baby is hard work, all those nine months, and then the time comes with the contractions and the pain and the water is breaking and the baby coming, and sometimes a little easier and sometimes a little more difficult. It's quite something. It's, in a way, dramatic. It's also dangerous, right, and tiring and something you look up against, and

something you pray for. Well, so the Apostle Paul writes it in verse 19, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again." You were born again and you need to be born again, I would say. "Oh little babies, little children of whom I travail in birth again."

You know preaching or writing an epistle like this is something blood serious because our lives are in danger. We some day must die. We need the forgiveness of our sins and what a responsibility because we could deceive people. We cannot deceive the elect, I know that, but we could deceive people, and it can be an obstacle to people. Now for the elect there are no obstacles, I know, but yet the responsibility, we can be an obstacle and the blood will be required from the hand of the pastors if they withhold people the Gospel, if they don't speak honestly, if they withhold the law or the Gospel and the way the Lord works in the hearts. So preaching is an impossible work. "Who is sufficient," the apostle said. There are frustrations and disappointments but also joy. It's quite a mixture. I sometimes say Sunday mornings, "I wish someone else could be in this pulpit," and yet not, I would like to be there. You look up against it and you long at the same time.

You know, I read in Colossians 1:24 that mix, "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you." Do you see that? "Who now rejoice in my sufferings," and my sufferings, "for you," I rejoice, "and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church." Or Colossians 1:29, "Whereunto I also labour," I labor, "striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily." Hard work at home and on the pulpit to pray for opening, to meditate upon the text, to study it as good as we can, to feel, to experience what's written, to be as clay in the hands of God and not more, but yet trying to persuade men, to convince, to get it through, to sow that seed, to continue in preaching it in spite of all the disappointments and the concerns, to compel them to enter in because the love of Christ constrains us. Quite something. Hard work. It's hard work to be a parent. It's hard work to be married. It's hard work in your personal occupations. But there's also a precious hard work and they that desire the office of a bishop desire a good thing.

So I don't want to discourage anyone. I hope I won't young men, there might be some who feel kind of that's the work I would love to do but I can't. I'm not capable. Like Isaiah said, "I'm a man of unclean lips. How can I preach the word of God?" Unclean lips. And Jeremiah said, "I'm young." And Moses said, "I can't speak." And yet the Lord uses clay in his hands and it's a precious work to do it dependent upon the Lord and to do it in his favor and that feeling of the Lord helping, and that feeling of people praying for their church. It's all so wonderful.

So we now rejoice in my sufferings for you. Hard work. Greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception, in sorrow they shall bring forth children, right? Those birth pangs? And that's the work of a pastor, to deliver, to labor, to be in labor. That is something to think about. But let's go to the next one: blessed work. "Ye know how through," verse 13, "Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first." How? Through infirmity of the flesh, something in his body, being sick or wounded. You know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the Gospel. Because of my sickness I preached the Gospel to you.

Some say the word "through" means "in." I don't think that's the real explanation but just as some say, "You know in and through the flesh. I was weak. I was not feeling so well. Because I was not feeling so well, I preached the word of God. I was not a strong man but I yet preached the word of God." Obviously, in other words, "through" means "because." You know how because of infirmity of the flesh I preached the Gospel to you. I think that's what it means. That's what the word "through" most of the time means, "because," meaning in that area was a doctor, in that area was medication, in that area was a climate better for his health, and because of he had to go therefore, his sickness somehow in God's providence he was led there. He didn't decide there to go, he was led there through his infirmity. He was so sick he had to be there. Or others say because he was wounded. He was stoned and they thought he was dead, he had to recuperate, and he couldn't travel, he couldn't leave. So because of the infirmity, he was there and he stayed there for a while. Do you see that? God's providence. The Lord knows what to do also his servants to make them sick or to give them another place, and he leads and he guides in an organic way. Not only the Apostle Paul did in this case not receive a voice out of heaven, "You have to go to Galatia," but he was led there through his infirmity.

You know how infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first, at that location I preached the Gospel. The Gospel of God's free grace. The good message. The joyful tiding. I preached you the word of the living God, that you can be saved by grace only. Because I was sick, I had to be among you and stay among you and I preached the word of God, I preached the Gospel especially, and my temptation which was in my flesh, ye despised not nor rejected. So what happened to him, he didn't look good. He looked kind of contemptible. He was like kind of, "I'd rather listen to someone else." He looked like someone so sick that you say, "Can someone so sick say something good?"

But my temptation which was in my flesh that kind of offended you, could have offended you, ye despised not. You did not despise me because of my sickness, because of my speech impediment, because of my bodily physics. No, you didn't. In my temptation which was in my flesh, ye despised not, nor rejected. You did not reject me, but received me as an angel of God. You received me. You heard me and the Lord blessed the word. He blessed the word of a sick man. He blessed the word of someone you would say, "That's hard to listen to." In spite of those temptations within my flesh, ye despised not, nor rejected. You accepted me. You tolerated me and you received me as an angel of God, as a messenger sent by God. You see, the Lord blessed it and the Lord can bless weak vessels. The Lord can bless weak vessels to his glory. You know, some and this is a quote I found, a quote: some mighty weak vessels, mighty weak vessels I used in communicating the Gospel, because we have that treasure in earthen vessels and that's fine, that excellency of the power may be of God and not of us.

So this week I hope to also teach these students again in Grand Rapids. I'm going to tell them you don't have to show off, you don't have to be good, you don't have to be perfect, your language, you work on that and your exegesis and you work on all those things but you don't, you yet will be only clay, and you don't have to expect anything of yourself. It's the Lord doing it. It's the Lord doing it. The treasure of the word of God is the Gospel

in earthen vessels, in weak vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God. In other words, that the Lord receives the glory and the honor. That preacher would not say, "See, it's my eloquence." The preacher would say, "See, that's what I did. I worked so hard, I convinced them, I persuaded them. I was smart. I worked hard and the Lord used me." Well, think about that.

We also read this in 2 Corinthians, "For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." That's in 2 Corinthians 10. His speech contemptible and his bodily presence is weak. That's how the Lord works outwardly and also spiritually, making people feel weak, making people feel powerless, bringing people to the place of, "I can't do this," and God says, "Yes, now I'm going to use you." First the Lord breaks your bones in your legs so you can't walk, you can't go forth and the Lord says, "I help you." That's so often in so many different ways, the Lord makes you feel weak to make strong, to make useful in his vineyard.

2 Corinthians 12:9, "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee." Remember that thorn in the flesh? Maybe that's related. Maybe there's something of that sickness as well. Some say it's malaria and some say it is being wounded, and some say it's an eye sickness. We don't know but he had a thorn in the flesh, right? Wherever he went he always felt it, some pain, something that was not easy, and yet, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength," my strength, not yours, "my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities," will glory in my infirmities, "that the power of Christ may rest upon me," he says. The power of Christ. You see blessedness.

Also look at verse 15 and 16, "Where is then the blessedness ye spake of?" You see, there was a blessedness but where is it now because they loved him, they liked him, they received him as an angel of God even as Christ Jesus, 14 the last words, even as Christ Jesus. They received the Apostle Paul with open arms after they have received Christ, even as Christ Jesus. They have received him. He's talking about the past. What's happening there now? They have received the Lord Jesus. They have received him as an angel of God. Have you received the ministers and me as a messenger of God? And have you received me as you have received Christ Jesus? Or have you not received him? And if you reject me, that's fine, but to reject Christ, to reject Christ.

You know, the Apostle Paul is not so concerned about himself. No, not so much concerned about himself. He says at the end of verse 12, "ye have not injured me at all." Didn't they? Well, they were really negative and critical, the Apostle Paul says, "You didn't hurt me. You really didn't hurt me. I was grieved. You rejected Christ." So he's not mad. He's not saying, "I'm mad at you. I'm angry." No, he said, "I am not injured by you but I mean the best, and think about the past, how the Lord has blessed the word to your hearts and you have received Christ Jesus, or have you only rejected him?" Right? There's nothing in between. He's received or rejected. Some people have not heard about Christ at all, that's something else, but you have. Have you received him?

He came to his own and his own received him not. Isn't that something, received him not. If you don't like me and have not received me, that's minor, but having not received Christ but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. "Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me." So that's why some people see it as an eye sickness and he says to the people, "You know, if it would have been possible you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me so I could see better." Maybe. But others say this is just an expression of how much they loved him, they would have plucked out their eyes for him. They really loved that pastor in the past and things have changed over time. It feels like he's their enemy now.

So things changed over time. The Apostle Paul is grieving, "What's happening to you? You received me, you received the Gospel. Where is the blessing that ye speak of? You would have plucked out your own eyes and have given them to me. "Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?" You see, so hard work, he's travailing and laboring and lowering himself and doing his utmost to convince and persuade not in his own strength, and the second thought was the Lord blessed the work, in the past blessed the work. They received him as an angel of God and where is the blessedness now then? And the third thought: the purpose of this work.

Before we go to the text, what is the purpose of preaching? That you like the pastor? So that would be my goal, preaching in such a way that you all like me, that you all love me, you all agree with me? That's not the purpose. I may strongly disagree with you and I must have the courage to say that. I must have the courage to say, "No, absolutely not. You are so wrong." I must have the courage to preach the law and the Gospel and in Christ and all that belongs to him.

So what is Paul's purpose? To have a big church? Lots of members? Sound doctrine? All behaving? All contributing? All involved? A healthy congregation unified in harmony? It would be nice but that's not his purpose. Of course, people are afraid, pastors are also afraid of the disapproval of the people but they may not adjust the message. I was shocked, I told you before, I was shocked when I attended years ago a funeral and the word "sin" and "grace" was not mentioned once, and "guilt." So after the funeral I talked to the pastor and I said, "I don't understand it. Death came into this world because of sin. That's so basic and you didn't talk about that. I'm confused." And he said, "Well, I did not know what type of people would be in church. I had no idea so I had to be careful." You see, that is trying to please the people. The Apostle Paul he was open about the word of the living God and if people are disappointed, he needs a free conscience himself.

But his real purpose is what you can find in verse 19. We have to come back to the previous verses. "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you." That's his purpose. "I travail and travail again and go through the birth pangs and do my utmost because my purpose, my desire is that Christ is formed, fully formed in you." How can that be? How can Christ be formed in someone? Well, then Christ needs to be in someone in a sense, right? Not literally but in the mind, in the heart. To start with in the mind, that he may be on your mind all the time and be formed and

developed more clearly that he may increase in your heart and in your home circumstance, that he may increase, be formed and formed furthermore in you, that the meditation of him might be sweet and sweeter that you may pray also unto him without ceasing, that you may resemble him more in walk and talk and aspiration and your whole life resembling him, that you may fully trust him and that you may trust him even more fuller that he may be formed in you. That he may become more precious to you in all his attributes, in his offices, in his names, in his natures. He's so much more, we have so much to learn and absorb about Jesus that he may be formed in you, that he may be your life, not only your lifeline, also your life, like water is the life for a fish and the air is the life of a bird, and that so Christ may be your life because if he is your life, then your death will be gain. To be more dependent upon him, to remain in him, to suck up the sap from him, to grow up in him, to be being built up in him. You know, when I preach about this, I feel such a beginner. He must be formed in us and he is so big, it's just so much, how much of him has been formed in you, child of God?

Ephesians 3:17, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love." That's quite a text, right, Ephesians 3:17? Christ not just visiting once in a while but dwelling. Stay there that Christ may be formed in you, dwell in you, in your hearts by faith, by believing, by exercising that trust that you may be rooted and grounded in love. Or Colossians 2:7, very close, "Rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving." Or Colossians 1:28, "Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Presenting him.

Oh, may that be our purpose in preaching and personally, that Christ would be formed in us. Then we need, first, a new heart, right? A life and being born again. "Little children, of whom I travail birthing them." The Apostle Paul came alongside and he became like them so now he says, "Now you can also become like me." Christ in us. For by him, by Christ, were all things created. By Christ. By him all things were created that are in heaven and on earth, visible, invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things are created by him and for him. By Christ and for Christ. For Christ. And he is before all things and by him all things consist. By Christ. And he is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead that in all things he might have the preeminence. Christ. For it pleased the Father that in him should all the fullness dwell. In him all the fullness dwells. Therefore put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.

So the Apostle Paul has a purpose. He loves to see Christ being formed in the heart of his people by faith, that they decrease and he increases. They are built up in him, resemble him, depend upon him. So when you read the Bible and you stop it, you stop that piece you have read, you could ask all the questions and many questions, what's the summary of this piece and whether there's a warning in this piece, what you have learned from this piece, but I would say also ask yourself this question: where was Christ in this piece? Because Christ is in every text somehow and he wants to be formed in people so that he is their purpose and their joy. And you know, in that sense, that's the way to fight sins and

[unintelligible] sins and addictions and handle suffering. If Christ is formed in you, I don't pity you. Then you have hope. You have a joy and a purpose. Your life is meaningful. And if he is not formed in you, if that heart is empty, if Christ is not in you, then something else is there. Is there a void, is there sin, there must be something you adore, something you live for.

But Christ wants to be formed in you so when you go on home, you may want to ask the question: is there anything of Christ formed in you? Is there anything? And you may have to come to the conclusion: nothing. Nothing of Christ formed in me and repent of this and say, "Lord, that's my own fault. It's that I keep that door closed. I keep that door locked. I resist it." Repent of that and also ask the Lord to open that door, that he is standing at the door and he knocks as Lord, also open the door and say, "Lord, I can't do it. I should, I must, I'm commanded but I can't." And seek the Lord and the seek the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Savior because he's before all things and by him all things consist.

It's hard work, blessed work, the purpose of the work, continued work at the same. Congregation, the Apostle Paul is very experiential in this piece, very warm and loving and personal, and he is still preaching. He talked about the past, how he came because of his infirmities, and he talked about that they liked him in those days, they could pluck out their eyes for him and was blessed, and he preached that purpose, but he is still talking to them. "Brethren, I beseech you." So some were against him. Some were his enemies. They didn't like him at all anymore. He addresses them as brethren, warm and loving, no revenge, no hard feelings. "You have not injured me. I'm grieved. You've not injured me. I beseech you, I pray you, I beg you, be as I am, for I am as ye are. So today I beseech you, I pray you, be reconciled with God."

And the Apostle Paul compares himself with the zealous Judaizers. Do you see that piece in verse 17 and 18? "They," 17, "They," those Judaizers, those false teachers, "They zealously affect you." Those Judaizers, they came to ruin the congregation and yet a zeal, a real zeal to affect you, to lure you in, a real zeal to win you over to their camp, and they have noticed that zeal and Satan also has a zeal and false doctrine as a zeal. "They zealously affect you," win you over, "but not well; yea, they would exclude you," they would like to have you and to depart from us, "exclude you that ye might affect them," and please them, and be with them. "But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing." So zeal can be very bad and zeal can be very good. Zeal itself is just having a passion for something and some of those Judaizers had a passion to get those people of God out of the congregation and join their church. Such a zeal, they zealously affect you. You have noticed that, they zealously affect you but not for the right purpose, not well. They would exclude you and have you that ye might affect them. They would be so pleased, "But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you."

So the Apostle Paul is telling them that he has a zeal for them and they haven't injured him but he has a zeal for them, that they may win Christ, that Christ is formed in them. The Apostle Paul is very unselfish. "It's not about me. I don't want to be formed in you. You don't need to be formed in me. Christ is to be formed in you. Little children," he's

talking about God's people in those congregations in Galatia, yes, God's people prone to this. He's not talking to unbelievers, he's talking to God's people falling back. They had such a blessing under his preaching and now years after they turn to enemies and he says, "How can that be?"

He continues with them also look at the word again, verse 19, "Little children," he's talking in a fatherly way to the babies in faith because they have not grown up, people of God not having grown up, still little children, "of whom I travail in birth again," they have to go again through the process of regeneration, a second wind, being brought to life again, "until Christ be formed in you, I desire to be present with you now," I would like to visit you again, "and to change my voice," being now he is talking in a suitable way, suitable tongue but if he is there personal, it's different, "to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you," I'm confused about you, I'm grieved about you.

Congregation, the Apostle Paul is writing to the congregations in Galatia and they are of the Galatian background, the Celtic background, the Gaul, think of France also, Gaul, that ethnic people. He's talking, "You are so gullible. Those foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? What happened to you?" That is his purpose, that they born again again. Well, you can't be born again again, I know, but kind of.

"My little children, of whom I travail in birth again so that Christ be formed in you," and Christ will be completely formed in God's people when they die, when they go to heaven when Christ will be completely formed in them and they will need in eternity to digest it and to absorb it, and every day will be new to them, never boring. Christ will be formed in them completely and Christ and God will be all-in-all. You're going home, right? Has Christ been formed in you? You can be seriously-minded and sound in doctrine and have been encouraged by a text and people may have said to you, "You just have to believe," and you try to believe but has Christ been formed in you? He is at the door and he knocks. Amen.