“UNTIL CHRIST IS FORMED IN YOU”

Galatians 4:8–20

Key Verse: 4:19

“My children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you…”

The famous Russian author Dostoyevsky wrote: “I want to suffer so that I may love.” To our ears it may sound weird, but he was talking about a deeper kind of love. He was saying that without suffering, our love can be shallow. In today’s passage Apostle Paul expresses this deeper kind of love toward the Galatians. He’s been writing to persuade them not to allow themselves to be circumcised. Previous to this section he’s been appealing to them theologically, but now he gets personal. He reminds them of how God changed them, and of the beautiful relationship he had with them when he first ministered to them. He reminds them of what he’d been through in order to help them, and, what he’s going through now. He says he’s “again in the pains of childbirth” for them. He says his goal is that “Christ is formed in you.” These expressions, unique to Galatians, are intriguing, yet hard to understand. May God help us grasp what it means for Christ to really be “formed in” us, and how it can happen. And may God bless each one of us to grow in Apostle Paul’s spiritual love for others.

Read verses 8,9. Here Paul mentions how the Galatians had changed. The most beautiful part of their change is that now, they “know God.” The Jews would use this word “know” as an idiom to express intimacy between a man and a woman. Paul is reminding the Galatians that they didn’t know “about” God; he says they *knew God*. In a sense, we all have an inborn knowledge of God, because we’re all made in God’s own image, and, because we all live in the world God made, which is constantly revealing who God is (Ge1:27; Ro1:19,20). But we’re also all born with a sinful nature, and our sin cuts us off from God and makes us ignorant of him. We all need to be striving to know God better. But these Galatians had crossed a threshold. How had they come to know God in such an intimate way? It was through Jesus, who was crucified and rose again. Through receiving Jesus the Son, they personally experienced the Holy Spirit and the Father’s great love. When we don’t really know God, deep within we live without hope, our hearts are hard, and we’re spiritually blind and ignorant (Eph 2:12; 4:18). We can’t know God just through knowing the right theology; we need to experience God in a personal way, through Jesus. Knowing God like this gives us conviction and assurance; it opens our spiritual eyes, and it changes us. Once we know God personally, we’re never the same. But once we come to know God through Jesus, we’re not thinking we’ve got it all figured out now; instead, we keep striving to know him more and more (Php3:10).

Look at verse 9. Paul revises his own statement that they know God; he adds, “or rather are known by God.” What does he mean by this? He’s not putting his confidence in *their* knowledge of *God*; he’s putting his confidence in *God’s* knowledge of *them*. God knows all about us. He knows us better than we know ourselves. In 1 Corinthians 13:12 Paul writes about our knowledge of God, and God’s knowledge of us, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” Some people would rather not be fully known by anyone, not even by their spouse. But Paul had such transparency with God, such confidence in his grace, such hope to know God fully, even as he was fully known. It’s only the amazing grace of God that proud, self-absorbed and ignorant sinners like us can know and be known by God so deeply. Knowing God intimately is a key aspect of living in the grace of Christ (1:6; cf. Jn17:3).

But in these verses Paul is not commending the Galatians for knowing God; he’s rebuking them. Why? Read verses 8,9 again. He says they’re going back to be “enslaved” to “weak and miserable forces.” What’s he talking about? He mentions their former idolatry. Were the Galatians returning to idol worship? No. But they were returning to the superstitious mentality associated with idol worship. They were caving in to the pressure from the Judaizers to follow the law, thinking it would keep them spiritually safe, and right with God. What specific laws were they following? Read verse 10. Clearly, the Judaizers would never just settle for getting these Gentile Christians to be circumcised; they would keep pushing until they got them to keep all their Jewish laws and traditions. Keeping special religious holidays isn’t bad. But it *is* bad when we’re doing it to try to earn God’s favor, if we think we’re more or less righteous if we do or don’t observe those special religious events. Being spiritually healthy doesn’t come from what we do; it comes from accepting what Christ has done for us. So Paul writes in verse 11, “I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.” If we’re not really relying on the grace of Jesus alone, if we’re trying to do outward things to make ourselves spiritual, it leaves us in a spiritually dangerous state.

In verses 12–16 Paul goes on to describe their earlier relationship. He calls them “brothers and sisters.” He says, “I became like you,” meaning he not only shared their way of life but also really thought of them as equals. And he reminds them of how he first arrived and brought them the good news of Jesus. At that time, Paul was ill. We’re not sure what his illness was, but we know that he shared the gospel with the Galatians on his first missionary journey. In one of the Galatian towns, Lystra, people stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead (Ac14:19). After that incident Paul went on to the Galatian town of Derbe, and then back to all the other Galatian churches to keep on ministering to them (Ac14:20–23). The illness he mentions here was probably during this time. It probably developed after his being stoned nearly to death. Though he was so ill, Paul never stopped sharing the good news of Jesus. He had such a spirit. He says here in verse 14 that his illness was “a trial” to them. It means his illness was serious, and they had to nurse him. But he remembers how gracious they’d been. He says, “you did not treat me with contempt or scorn.” Here, the word “scorn” literally means “spit out.” At that time, people thought getting sick meant being cursed by the gods, and helping such a person could bring that curse on oneself. So when they saw a sick person they would spit. But the Galatians didn’t think that way about Paul at all. He writes, “Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.” They did that because they had received the grace of Jesus through Paul. He goes on to write in verse 15, “I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.” Some people think this means Paul was suffering from a serious eye infection after being injured by the stoning. That may or may not be true. But the Galatians loved him so much that they even wanted to give him their own eyes.

Now, however, their relationship had cooled. So Paul writes in verse 15a, “Where, then, is your blessing of me now?” And in verse 16 he says, “Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?” What truth has he told them? He’s been telling them the truth of the gospel (2:5). He’s been challenging them to act in line with the truth of the gospel, to obey the gospel truth by relying only on the grace of Jesus, not on keeping laws (2:14; 5:7). Telling others the truth can turn them into enemies; but it can also do the opposite and make us even closer. The psalmist wrote, “Let a righteous man strike me—that is a kindness; let him rebuke me—that is oil on my head” (Ps141:5a). Proverbs 27:5 says, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” Proverbs 28:23 says, “Whoever rebukes a person will in the end gain favor rather than one who has a flattering tongue.” Proverbs 9:8b says, “…rebuke the wise and they will love you.” Often, rebuking based on the truth hurts the “rebuker” more than it does the “rebukee.” But it’s a deeper expression of love, to get people closer to Jesus and grow to become mature in him (Eph4:15). Only when we truly love are we willing to go through the pain of rebuking someone based on the truth.

Next, Paul tells the Galatians about the real motive of the Judaizers. Read verse 17. Nobody could deny the zeal of the Judaizers, but Paul says here that their zeal was really for their own glory. It’s always a danger for us as sinners to try to use ministry for our own glory. When we’re trying to make sure people know about what we’re doing for ministry, when we talk too much and exaggerate what we’re doing in order to impress others, we’re trying to gain glory for ourselves by ministering to people. Sometimes, when we’re spiritually unfulfilled, we’re trying to get people to love us and satisfy us by ministering to them. We’re trying to find personal affirmation and significance through ministry. It’s really sick. What’s the right motive in ministry? Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:2, “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.” Paul was doing his utmost to get people really united with Jesus and focused on Jesus, not on him. He was like John the Baptist, who rejoiced when people left him in order to go to Jesus and said, “He must become greater; I must become less” (Jn3:29,30).

Let’s read our key verse, verse 19. “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you…” Paul loved these people as if they were his own “dear children.” But in love, he’s also giving them a slight rebuke. He’s kind of saying, “With your spiritual wandering you’re putting me through the pains of childbirth again!” Though he’s rebuking, he’s still like a mother, willing to go through the pains of labor to give birth to a lovely child. Men don’t experience the pains of childbirth. But Paul experienced excruciating pains in his soul to help people spiritually. What does it really mean to be in the pains of childbirth for others? Our Lord Jesus is the best example. In a garden where he usually went to pray, as his arrest and crucifixion were about to begin, he bared his soul to his top three disciples: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mt26:38). Luke describes Jesus’ agony: “And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Lk22:44). Jesus went through this not for himself, but to save all people, including us. Paul had grown in the image of Jesus, ready to wrestle in prayer until people could stand firm in Christ, mature and fully assured (cf. Col4:12). He was fighting so hard spiritually so that the people he ministered to could grow in Christ (Col2:1). He wrote in Colossians 1:24, “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regards to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”

It’s never easy to lead people to Jesus; it requires an intense spiritual struggle and even an agony of soul. We’d much rather just say a few words and expect people to change. Or show them a movie, or have them read a book, or at best, be a silent good influence around them. None of those things are bad. But to really help people, we’ve got to be willing to go through the pains of childbirth spiritually. Today it seems popular among young adults to be “chill,” not to get too uptight about anything. Yes, we need to rest in the grace of Jesus, which gives us peace; but to minister to others, we’ve got to be willing to go through a lot of struggle and pain. Especially, we’ve got to wrestle in prayer for them. If we’re not willing to do that, honestly we’re being superficial, selfish and lazy.

We also need Paul’s clear goal. Read verse 19 again. What does “Christ formed in you” mean? When we receive Jesus by faith, he comes to live in us, even though we may not realize it (2Co13:5). Christ in us makes our spirits alive (Ro8:10). Christ in us is like a treasure in a jar of clay (2Co4:6,7). Paul himself experienced it. He wrote in 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loves me and gave himself for me.” Paul experienced the real presence of Christ within him only when he was deeply convicted of his own self-righteousness. When he came to see the utter darkness in his soul in the light of Christ, he could repent, receive Jesus, and really start relying only on the grace of Jesus, not on himself or his abilities. So for Christ to be formed in us, we first need to realize what sinners we are before God. Then we need to turn to Jesus humbly in faith and receive him. It’s not about saying a superficial sinner’s prayer and then thinking I’m alright with God; its about experiencing the depth of my sin, and yet the even greater depth of the grace of Jesus. When Christ is formed in us, we’re changed at our very core: from sin-loving to Christ-loving, from self-centered, self-reliant, to Christ-centered, Christ-reliant. We should not give up our personal spiritual struggle until Christ is really formed in us. And we should not relax in helping others until Christ is really formed in them.

When Christ is formed in us, we won’t be swayed back and forth by our sinful desires, by situations, problems, people, or strange teachings (Eph4:14). When Christ is formed in us, we have independent faith, real knowledge of God, and a healthy approach to serving God—not for my own glory or righteousness, but really out of love for God and for others. In helping others, we can have many temporary goals—to become faithful to Bible study, to start attending church, to start a personal prayer life, etc. We may also want to help people address life problems and get on a good life path. But we should never lose sight of the real goal: that Christ may be formed in them. It should be the focus of our prayers.

Today we mainly thought about what it means for Christ to be formed in us, and how that can happen. May God help us through spiritual struggle to experience Christ being formed in us. May God also give us the deeper love that’s willing to go through suffering to help others.

* For a study of Galatians 4:21-31, see the study questions.