

The Way Forward is Never Behind Us
Galatians 4.8-20
September 30

A character in a comic strip stated, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. When I became a Christian as a teenager, I discovered the fight of the Christian life had just begun. While I rejoiced in my new life in Christ, there were areas of my pre-Christian life upon which "I cast a wishful eye" – in the wrong direction. In our focal passage, Paul challenged believers focusing on their life in the past.

What does this passage teach twenty-first-century believers about the way forward in the Christian life?

First, Paul warned of the dangers of Christians “casting a wishful eye” to their past life (Gal. 4.8-11). Remember in Galatians, Paul addressed people who came to Christ as adults. Practically speaking, there are two ways by which Christians may "cast a wishful eye" to their past life before Christ. First, I have heard Christian "testimonies" in which a Christian has glorified/enjoyed telling of their life experiences and sins before Christian salvation. Second, as Christians, we may yearn for a past life free from the constraints of the gospel.

Paul recognized the power of the “wishful eye” looking backward to life before encountering Christ. The apostle offered a threefold reminder to help Christians checkmate the backward look. First, the apostle reminded the Galatians of the precise reality at which they ‘cast their “wishful eye.” Before the freedom provided by Christ, sin enslaves people to sin and demonic forces (weak and worthless elements -v. 9). Second, the past is deceptive. The "good old days" were never good; the Galatians worshiped gods that were not real (v.8). Third, so-called freedom is never free. "Turning back" retreats to a religion based upon rituals and special days (v. 10)– likely a reference to the message of Judaizer missionaries. The Galatians had retreated to a religion of externals and rituals rather than a relationship of intimacy. Paul counters the “wishful eye syndrome” by reminding Christians they have come to know God through Christ, and more importantly, they have become known by God in an intimate, spiritual sense. Paul hoped the remembrance of an intimate relationship with God would check their desire to move from a life status of sonship and inheritance to slavery

Second, Paul set forth the grace of Christian relationships as a corrective “to casting a wishful eye” to the past (Gal. 4.12-14). Paul commanded the Galatians to "become like him." Paul's command is not a selfish demand; Paul became like the Galatians to minister to them. A discipleship relationship means that a discipler leads by precept and example. A discipler says, "Follow me as I follow Christ." The relationship of a discipler and disciple is one of mutual ministry. “Become like me because I became like you.” Paul ministered to the Galatians, but the Galatians also ministered to Paul. In Paul's day, people perceived of sickness as a punishment of the gods. In contrast, the Galatians received Paul despite an unknown physical condition. "To cast a wishful eye" to our previous life apart from Christ involves a turning from Christ and from Christ's people.

Third, Paul warned that “casting a wishful eye” to a life apart from Christ entailed following false teachers with false motives (Gal. 4.15-20). False teachers emphasizing obedience to the Jewish law had “bewitched” or “cast a spell on” the Galatians (Gal. 3.1). These false teachers zealously pursued (a literal translation) the Galatians and wanted the Galatians to pursue them zealously. The zeal of the false teachers for the Galatians was not good, that is, for the benefit of Paul’s readers. Unlike the false teachers, Paul possessed a parental burden for the Galatians. He called them “my children” of the faith. As a spiritual parent, Paul detailed his goal and pain of being a spiritual parent. On occasion, a spiritual parent endures pain. Paul occasionally described himself as the spiritual parent of his converts. Paul viewed himself as the spiritual father. On at least two occasions, Paul described himself as a spiritual mother (Gal. 4.19; 1 Thess. 2.7). Paul endured labor birth pangs when the Galatians came to Christ. The anguish of “birth pangs” of anguish Paul feels now is caused by the Galatians turning from the gospel of grace to the enslavement of the law. Paul’s goal as a spiritual parent is not the mere spiritual birth of converts. Paul's goal is spiritual growth and maturity – “Christ formed in you.” The false teachers were self-serving and wanted people to be dependent upon them. Paul desired people to grow – “Christ formed in you.”