

## Galatians 4:8-20

There is a curiosity in here. What is the situation Paul is talking about when he mentions the illness he had when he first arrived in Galatia? This would have been a part of his first missionary journey, when he visited several cities in southern Galatia.

The mention of eyes in verse 15 leads some to think the illness was related to his poor eyesight. We know Paul had bad eyesight. He even mentions that specifically at the end of this letter when he talks about how large his letters were when he wrote the greeting in his own hand. Most of the letter was handwritten by someone else at Paul's direction, quite possibly Luke. And it sounds like that was it when Paul talks about how the Galatians would have "given him their own eyes." But the idea of sacrificing one's own eyes was also just a proverbial way of saying, "I'd do anything for you," so that's not necessarily the case.

There have been other suggestions made. Maybe it was an injury received in some persecution. It may have been malaria, which was common in the Mediterranean world of the first century. Some have suggested Paul may have suffered from seizures. At the end of the day, we don't know, and I don't think we're going to find the answer on this side of eternity unless some new piece of evidence turns up in some early Christian writing.

But one thing is for sure: Paul is not happy. Some of the Christians in Galatia have turned away from sound teaching and are listening to false teachers who have told them not to listen to Paul.

"Am I your enemy for telling you the truth?" he asks. This is important to say: No one is ever your enemy for telling you the truth. The truth might hurt. You might not want to hear it. We often do not. And Paul did remind us elsewhere in his letters about the importance of "speaking the truth in love." Truth can and should be presented in love. There are certainly ways of speaking the truth that are less hurtful. But no one who tells you the truth is against you.

Well, what is the truth here? What is going on in Galatia?

Well, we are not really not sure what the situation is. We know that these Christians in Lystra, Iconium, and Derby, the cities Paul visited, came to Christ out of pagan backgrounds. They had worshipped idols before they heard the gospel.

There were some Greek philosophers of the time who argued that the only gods that should be worshipped were the gods evidenced by nature: The sun, moon, stars, and planets. And many of the Greek gods were such "astral spirits." Apollo was the sun

god. Aphrodite was the planet Venus. Ares was Mars. Zeus was Jupiter. And so on. These astral deities were associated with certain days and seasons.

But we also know that there were “Judaizers” at work in Galatia. The Judaizers were these early Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentiles could not come to Christ unless they also became fully Jewish, keeping and observing the whole Jewish Law, including all the holy days and religious festivals. That would include Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, Yom Kippur, the Festival of Shelters, and later, Purim and Hanukah. Maybe I’m forgetting some, too. And then were Sabbath days and Sabbath years, and so on. And that does not include all the special days which had been added to the Jewish calendar by tradition in the centuries leading up to the time of Jesus.

So these early Gentile Christians, coming out of a pagan background, may have been easily drawn to these Judaizing teachers because of this idea of a “holy calendar.” It was familiar. It was similar to what they knew in their pagan past, worshipping the gods on their days, observing the passing of seasons with sacrifices to the idols of the gods of those seasons, and so on. Now it’s a Jewish calendar and one God, but still, the basic idea is similar.

The risk of such a way of thinking is that if we put a lot of emphasis on honoring God on holy days and at holy times of the year, then we might imagine that we have completed our obligations to God. That’s how the pagan calendar worked. If you have a hundred gods, you can’t think about every one of them on every day of the year, so you observe the feast of so-and-so on their appointed day, and then you don’t worry about them until the next year. But we serve a God who created every day of the year. And a God who expects our complete devotion every day, not just on certain days.

The Judaizers had made an idol out of their Jewish traditions. And they were giving that idol to the Galatian Christians, who picked it up because it was familiar to their own traditions.

Idolatry is the worship of anything that is created instead of the Creator God. And it can take so many forms. When we think about idolatry, we probably think of something like that story from the book of Exodus. Moses is gone, and the people are getting restless. They come to Aaron and say, “Make us a god.” And he makes them a golden bull to worship. And we think, “Well, that was really stupid. Who would worship a golden bull instead of the true God who just rescued them from slavery in Egypt!”

But anything that is worshipped is an idol. Wealth, fame, power, and pleasure are the chief idols of our society. But there are more. And often times, even things that

are good can become idols. Food can become an idol. We have several television channels entirely devoted to it, after all. Work can become idol. We are, after all, a nation of workaholics. On the other hand, rest and recreation can become idols. We also have numerous TV channels devoted to hunting and fishing. Just saying. Even family can become an idol. We usually think of family as a very good thing, which it is, but if we are more devoted to our family than to God, that's a problem.

When we devote our lives to anything in place of God, it becomes an idol. In the case of the Pharisees, tradition was their idol. They worshipped their own traditions. They reduced godliness to holding fast to tradition. And the danger of Pharisaism is still real. We are still tempted to idolize our traditions, to think more of them than of God.

The danger of religious idolatry is that then we imagine we are right in our spirits with something less than real fellowship with God. If we worship an idol, any idol, then we are missing out on better things. Because no created thing, no matter how good it is, can take the place of a relationship with God.

God wants us to worship him because he doesn't want us to sacrifice what is best for something that is only good. There are many good things in this world. But if we devote our lives to any of them, we miss out on the best thing: Knowing God, loving him, and living in relationship with him.