

READ and STAND FAST

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STAND FAST: A fascinating aspect of Paul's letter to the Galatians is that it is a powerfully simple explanation of the scheme of redemption. I have at least five commentaries on the book of Galatians in my library that exceed four hundred pages in length. Yet in the copy of the New Testament at my left hand as I write this, the letter is a little over six pages long. I do not disdain the scholarship and diligence of those who write lengthy analyses of Biblical books; indeed I admire such efforts. But at the day's end it must be said at times that the letter itself sheds light on the commentary.

Preachers go through periods of emphasis in their studies. We try to get a handle on the geography, the history, the social and cultural context of the passages we study. Language studies are helpful as they unlock the meaning secured in the bank of another language's vocabulary and grammar. And sometimes we go to the commentaries to see what the better minds of the past had to say. All of this is good. But there comes a time, I believe, when it is good for the Bible student (preacher or not) to put away the tools and simply read the text.

I think that this is the purpose of what I call preparatory study. We do our homework and then we return to the genuine item, the text itself. When we allow all the work we have done in the past to provide a backdrop for a new reading of the text, we are then ready to learn. With this in mind consider Galatians 5:1, which in the KJV says, "*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.*" An "all in one sitting with no interruptions" reading of Galatians (informed by one's previous studies and analysis of the book) reveals the point of the verse.

In the first two chapters Paul warns the Galatian Christians that they had better not leave the gospel of Christ. To accept an alternative is spiritual death, particularly if that alternative is a reversion to Judaism (see especially 2:16-21). In chapter three the value of the Law of Moses is upheld while its limitations and purpose are made plain. In chapter four the argument is made that freedom is in Christ and bondage awaits those who would return to Judaism. Christians are now God's children of promise. Chapters five and six contain applications of the principles revealed in the previous four chapters. This approach to the text seems simple, and it is in a way. But remember that this approach builds on the student's previous preparation for such reading. My point is that once the preparatory work is done, the student must take the time to simply read the text through and allow the mind to do its work in understanding God's Will.

Now back to Galatians 5:1. Since the Christians here were being pushed to return to a system of religion that had been specifically designed to lead them forward to Christ, Paul says: Don't do it! No one in his or her right mind would ever leave a state of spiritual liberty and freedom (from the power and guilt of sin) in order to return to bondage. Paul tells them to stay with Jesus and not to go back to Judaism. If they do they will just get tangled up in the mess of bondage from which they had already escaped. When you just read it through this is what comes out.

Now, how do we apply this particular passage to our situation? We are not particularly tempted with going back into Judaism, because most of us did not come out of Judaism. Most of us came out of the world. We are told today that the Christian religion is too restrictive for modern people (it is restrictive in a good way...see Galatians 5:17-26). We are told by moderns that if we want to be free from these restrictions we ought to return to the world and embrace the freedom of doing whatever one pleases to do. But such an attitude and the behaviors that attend it engender a deceptive and counterfeit freedom. It is bondage to sin and will result in the loss of the soul. So what we do? We stand fast in the liberty that Christ provides. This is real liberty, provided by His Cross. Reading Galatians encourages us to confidently stand fast in it.