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The Galatians and the Witch's Spell

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Galatians 3:1 "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched (lit. cast the witch's spell over) you...?"

The apostle says that these people had come under a spell. Have you ever been under a spell? I should think (without having had any experience) that to come under a witch's spell is to wake up at some point and realise that you have been in an unreal realm. It may have been pleasant for the time being, like the effect of opium, but afterwards it was revealed to have been an illusion, an unreality, a false world, everything had been suggesting what was not true after all. During that time of the spell you have been deprived of your normal state of good sense, you were not yourself, and the effects were quite different from those which had been presented to your mind under the spell.

To look closely into this letter to the Galatians is to see that that is exactly what had happened. It was a spell indeed, and a spell which meant that they were taken out of the realm of the greatest of all realities, and put into the realm of things which were false and deceiving, and where they were robbed of their true spiritual position, and placed in a false one.

What was the nature of the spell? The Holy Spirit is very apt in His way of describing things. The phrase: "the witch's spell" could not be improved upon as a description of what had happened to these believers. These believers had come right out into a living place with Christ, and they had, through faith, received the Holy Spirit. They had been emancipated and set free from all the old thraldoms. They had been put in a place of spiritual liberty, spiritual ascendancy, spiritual power, spiritual life, and they had had a great enjoyment of the Lord. But, being Gentiles, and having turned to Christ, certain things had entered into their experience outwardly. Outwardly they had become

involved in a great deal of persecution. They had found tremendous antagonism levelled against them. Inwardly they had become aware of the fact of two natures, an old and a new, that which the apostle speaks of in this letter as the flesh and the Spirit. And, while they had come to the place where the old and fleshly nature was triumphed over by a life in the Spirit, they knew only too well that the old and the fleshly nature was not annihilated, and that to maintain their position of ascendancy, every day they must maintain a walk in the Spirit.

The walk in the Spirit demanded a continuous appropriation of Christ and obedience to Him. These were two of the things which had come into their lives, and represented a certain amount of difficulty. It was not easy to suffer persecution. It was not always easy to be obedient and to walk in the Spirit. It represented a continuous yielding to the Lord.

The other thing which governed their life entirely was that it was a life of faith. While a life of faith brings into a wonderful realm of ever fresh discoveries and blessing, it is a life of *faith*, and the old and natural life never takes kindly to a life of faith, but is always seeking the seen and the felt, that which can be provided by the senses; that realm of outward perception, as over against the life which is entirely by faith in God. While these Galatians went on with the Lord they had a life of knowing and enjoying the Lord.

We all know that the Christian life is not a picnic every day. The Word of the Lord never promises that it will be. We are not in the playground; we are in the school. We are not here for pleasure and enjoyment; we are here for real business and grim conflict. A day of unmixed pleasure and glory lies ahead for us; in the meantime it is a life of training, discipline, equipping for that day, and it becomes strenuous sometimes. We would deceive nobody who is not a believer by saying that if you become a believer you are going to float about in the air, play upon imaginary harps all the days of your life and never have any trouble. You will come up against the grim realities, of which you may be altogether unconscious at present. You will find that you are precipitated into the battle, and are taken into a place of deep training and discipline. It is in that realm that we make our discoveries, and find our wonderful enlargement. That does not mean for one moment that while such things obtain there can be no joy. The New Testament is a strange paradox throughout: "Sorrowing, yet always rejoicing"; "Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation..." It is a strange contradiction, and the man of the world understands nothing of that.

However, the Christian life is a grim business for the time being, and the Galatians came to recognise that, and sometimes, in common with all other Christians at all times, the sense of the conflict and the pressure registered itself in a costly way. Nevertheless, ask anyone who knows the Lord best, and who knows the cost most, whether they would give up the Lord in order to escape the cost, and you will find that they will give no consideration to that — unless they become tricked, which is exactly what happened here.

There came down to these Galatian believers certain men who were Jews, who pretended to be Christians, and the most that can be said in their favour is that they acknowledged Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. That does not mean for a moment that they had seen Him as the Eternal Son of God, and it does not mean that anything was entailed in the setting aside of Judaism. These Judaisers, with the Christian name, went in the track of Paul wherever he went with the Gospel, and worked their way through the network of Jewish synagogues until they got into this area known as Galatia, and began their Judaising activities in direct contradiction to his Gospel. They found a point of contact, and said to these believers: Now, you are having a difficult time; this kind of life that Paul has shown to you is a very strenuous life (we are not saying they used these words, but this was clearly the line of argument); this struggle and this effort to live this life is because of a fundamental

mistake! All you have to do to be accepted with God is to observe the law! You come to the synagogue and carry out these various regulations of Moses; that is all that is required of you! So many meetings a week, and so many sermons a week, so many outward observances a week, and all is well! God's law is so-and-so: observe God's law, and all is well (a very plausible argument)! Then, you see, you are suffering a great deal of opposition and antagonism from without, also upon this fundamental error! You have taken up a position which is bringing this upon you! You will find that a great deal of that persecution will drop away if you will simply let go this extreme position that you have taken, this life of faith, this detachment from the recognised and accepted religious system of the Jews; and things will become very much easier for you because you will be associated with that which is accepted and recognised! Paul is all wrong, and he has led you into this position, and these are the consequences! Our counsel is that you should all be circumcised, have the centre of your relationship to the historic order of things, carry out these regulations, and you will be left alone and escape this intense spiritual conflict, inwardly and outwardly! You will cease to have this inward pressure; you will not have all the strain of a life of faith, it will become a life of sight; and the way will become easy!

Because these Galatian believers were conscious of the cost of the life in relation to Christ, and were perhaps feeling badly just at that moment (for you may be sure the devil always strikes his blow at the weak moment) this whole proposition was like a witch's spell. A lovely sensation crept over them: Oh, is it not necessary for us, after all, to have all this to meet, all this to suffer? Are we, after all, wrong? Is it really that we have made a mistake, have been misled? They let the doubt in, and we know what happened. When they opened their mind to a question of a fundamental character like that, it rushed in and became like a spell to them, a beautiful suggestion, a wonderful idea! The suggestion was: We need not give up anything of Christ, but it can be so much easier if we let go what is evidently an extreme position which we have taken! The witch's spell did its work. They came under it, and let go their position.

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians in that condition. When you look closely into it, you see that it was a witch's spell. It was a lie! Paul says some very strong things about this: "...though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be *accursed*." That is regarding these Judaisers. This gospel which they were preaching brought them into the category of the curse, under an anathema from God; they were preaching an accursed gospel. With Paul there was no myth about their position; he saw how deadly it was as a deception, and how, under its spell — as it had been so plausibly presented just in a time when these people were feeling the strain of things — it had worked to rob them of their true position. That which Paul keeps continuously in view right through this letter is the cross of the Lord Jesus. The central and inclusive statement is this: "...before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly set forth crucified". Then in the rest of the letter Paul explains what that means.

We will look at some of these passages, not taking them in order of their occurrence, but rather in order of their spiritual significance.

A New Life

The first great passage is in chapter 2 verse 20: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." What is the declaration contained within that statement? The essence of the utterance is this: There is a life which is not man's natural life, which is not original human life, but is a peculiar, particular, unique life; it is the life of God Himself. That very life of God, eternal, incorruptible, indestructible, divine life, is the life

which it is the Lord's will for every one of His children to possess. There the whole of the Christian life has its beginning, its spring. What is the Gospel? What is the Christian life? It is not Judaism taking on the title of Christianity. It is not Christianity taking hold of Judaism. It is the possessing of God's own divine life. Anything short of that is not the Gospel! Whatever substitute may be offered it is a lie, and all lies are accursed things. The subtlety of this Judaising movement was to set aside the real Gospel, and offer an imitation, a substitute without the cost, something which can be had without paying the price. Paul here says that this life is the very foundation and basis of a true Christian experience, and it means this: It is no longer I, but Christ living in me. That is set right over against Judaism, which was all external, outward. This is inward. "Christ liveth in me: and *that life* which I now live..." Well, Paul, how did you become possessed of that life? In what way did you come into that great reality of Christ living in you? "I have been crucified with Christ!" What did that mean, Paul? That meant that Judaism had to go; I was steeped in Judaism, far more than any other of my brethren, the apostles, Jews as they were. I excelled in my zeal for the Jewish faith; but when I saw the Lord Jesus, and when I saw the meaning of Christ crucified, that which had been *my very life* (Judaism) became as nothing. *He* became my life, and that other ceased to have any meaning for me! Paul is here setting the life of Judaism, which is no life, over against the life of the indwelling Christ, which is *the* life.

These Judaisers came along and tried to reverse the order, and offered the false life of Judaism for the true life of the indwelling Christ. What is it to be a Christian? It is to receive God's very life in Christ into the innermost place in our being. "Christ liveth in me, and *that life* which I now live..." You cannot substitute that. There is nothing which can take the place of that. And yet there are those who think that if they go to meetings, and keep up their religious forms and observances, it is all well. It is not all well! That is the devil's lie! Any religious system which is a substitute for the indwelling Christ is an accursed thing, by reason of its very effect.

The beginning of the Christian life is: Christ liveth in me! How? "I have been crucified with Christ..." What does that mean? That the whole of my old life, even though it may have been religious, is an outward thing. It does not matter how much Christianity I may have been brought up in, or even participated in. It does not matter how much religion there is in my make-up, in my temperament, and it does not matter how much I mentally assent to as to Christian truth, my relationship with God in eternal salvation depends entirely upon whether I have received this life in Christ dwelling within. When I have to stand before God and give an account, as Paul says every man must do, no questions will be asked as to whether I was born into a Christian family, brought up in a Christian home, whether I went to the Sunday School or whether I went to the services, whether I believed this or that, or something else as a doctrine of Christianity. No such questions will ever be put, neither will such questions as to whether I committed this, that or some other sin, or never did. The number of sins, and the kind of sins will never, never be the ground of interrogation. One question will sum up everything, and decide the whole matter: Did you receive My gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ as an indwelling reality through faith, on the ground of the cross of Calvary? "The Scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe."

A New World

The next passage is in chapter 6 verse 14: "But far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world hath been crucified unto me, and I unto the world." The cross again is in the forefront. We are unable to deal with all the ground which concerns this particular passage. We are content to take one point of application, which is probably the most direct one. The apostle is saying here that his glorying is in the cross of the Lord Jesus, and that cross

has represented for him his being crucified to the world and the world to him. Of course, that is a very inclusive, comprehensive statement, and embraces a very great deal, but there is a particular application of it, or a particular usage of the statement here. These Judaisers had gone to Galatia, and had sought to make Jewish proselytes of these Christian believers by having them circumcised, so that they might append these Gentile believers to the Jewish church. As we have noticed, the point of their approach was this: If you do that, a great deal of persecution will cease. You will come into a realm of tolerance; at present you are outside everything that is recognised and accepted, and all the world is against you. Come into the fold. Come into the accepted system of things, and you will have an easy time. What was behind it? Paul says their object is simply to count heads, to “glory in your flesh”, to say: See how many proselytes we are making! See how many converts we have got! No wonder Paul writes with heat, lest these Judaisers should glory on their side in their success, and then that these Galatians should discover that these people were only glorying on the ground of their having forfeited their high position. Paul says: “Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world hath been crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” What does he mean? It does not matter to me what the world thinks! It does not matter one wit to me the attitude the world takes! Let it persecute! Let it say what it likes! Let the world defame. Let the world misrepresent. Let the world lie. Let the whole accepted religious system say what it likes. I have been crucified to this world! I am dead to all that, and that is dead to me! The cross of the Lord Jesus means the emancipation from the world in that sense.

We shall have to decide, once and for all, as definitely as Calvary was a once and for all thing, that we are not going to be influenced or deterred one little bit in our utterness of abandonment to the Lord by what the world (even the religious world) says and does. When we recognise that, there will be triumph. Paul was not altogether immune from the consciousness of what was going on against him. To him very often these things meant suffering. The attitude of the religious world did register itself upon his sensitive spirit, *but* it was settled with him quite definitely that he could never sacrifice his position one little bit in order to mitigate that suffering, in order to ease up that situation, in order to be more popular with men than he was. For him the cross meant that if he were to be unpopular universally he was dead to the question of popularity. We shall never be thoroughgoing Christians until we are there.

A New Power

The third passage is in chapter 3 verses 13-14: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree: that upon the Gentiles might come the blessing of Abraham in Christ Jesus; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” The witch’s spell was cast to rob of the enjoyment, the living expression of the reality that the Holy Spirit had now become the power of their lives. How set the enemy is against this great, basic fact of the true Christian life!

Firstly the enemy is always seeking to bring around that life a wrapping of death, to smother it, to arrest and check the progress, the development, and the activity of that divine life; to bring us again into the realm of spiritual death, where that life is no longer functioning. Then he is against our position, as through the cross, outside this world, and is always trying to bring us back into it somehow. He knows that if he can do it he has finished our testimony, he has robbed us of our position, he has denied the Gospel. He is dead set against this life of which the Holy Spirit is the energy. He is after a life in the flesh instead of the life in the Spirit, to counter a Holy Spirit filled and dominated life. He is the spirit of this age; he is the spirit that worketh in the children of disobedience; he is the great evil spirit, and he is set against the Holy Spirit of God. So these

believers were knowing something of that historic effort of the enemy to quench the government of the Holy Spirit.

We are in a spiritual succession to these Galatians. The Christian life is a life with Christ indwelling as its life. It is a life cut off by the cross from the world and all worldly considerations. It is a life indwelt and governed by the Holy Spirit in all details. That is where faith comes in. That is exactly the point where faith has its meaning. It is so much easier for the flesh to walk according to sense than it is to walk by faith in the Spirit. Life in the Spirit is sometimes so intangible. It calls for such an exercise of faith that you have to commit yourself to the Lord and go on when you cannot see, where you have no feeling, and believe implicitly that the Lord is not going to fail you and let you go wrong — even if He is hidden from your view, covered from your sense; yes, oft-times deeper than your very consciousness itself. You are living for His glory, and as you are at liberty within your heart to move you have to move and believe implicitly that God is going not only to preserve you from wrong and from mistakes, but is going to bring good out of your faith movement with Him. That is a life of faith, and our natures do not take to it at all kindly. It is a life in the Spirit, as differing from a life in the flesh. The best of the Lord's people sometimes cry out: Oh, that I might know exactly what it is the Lord is doing! The Lord says: You go on with Me and trust Me. I know what I am doing! We discover at length that the Lord *did* know what He was doing. He *does* make it plain. He is undoing the mischievous work of the devil from the beginning, that work by which he put into the very nature of man unbelief in God, doubt and questioning of God. The Lord is destroying that by the very life of faith, and showing to us that God is true and faithful and can be relied upon, and He need give no evidence to our flesh of that fact, but He proves it to those who repose faith in Him as the faithful God. How do you know? By believing! How do you come to see? By going on and not seeing, but trusting God. You say it is a difficult life! Well, the witch's spell can deliver you! You can have something else in its place! But you will find that the witch's spell is an illusion, and there is no substitute for that. It is the way of a wonderful, continuous discovery of the wonderful things of God. It is to those who believe that God makes known His deep secrets. Enrichment of life comes there. Paul says that this new life in the Spirit, with the Holy Spirit as the power of our life, comes by way of the cross.

A New Nature

Then in chapter 5 verse 24 we read: "And they that are of Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with the passions and the lusts thereof." There is something about that statement which in its implication is not pleasant for the eyes of Judaisers to detect. What Paul is saying, in effect, is this: It is all very well to accept the law; all very well to get back into the externals of religion; but does that deal with the moral issue? Are you quite sure that by that you are going to have rest of heart over the sin question? That was never so in Israel. The sin question was a thing kept perpetually in view. It was never finally dealt with. If you had watched Israel round that tabernacle, and seen the continuous stream of sacrifices, and the veritable river of blood daily flowing in the court of that tabernacle, you would have known that sin was not once and for all dealt with. You would have known that the sin question was always in view. We may be, after all, deluding ourselves that being outwardly religious gives us a standing with God, but it does not deal with the sin question. It does not deal with our very natures. Men may find substitutes. Men may find ways and means of trying to hush the voice of sin, and they may seem to have effectually done it. They may have a great religious system by which they think that they have dealt with the sin matter by passing responsibility over to someone else. We sing: "At peace with God..." It is a false peace that is merely based upon a system of outward religious activities. It is a false peace if it is not found in the precious, eternal efficacy of the Blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, which cleanseth us from all sin. The apostle says to the Galatians: They may have deceived you with their spell, and you may think that going back to Jewish ordinances deals

with the sin question, but you know that it does not. You will go out and discover that you are in bondage to the lusts of the flesh all the time.

By way of the cross there is a new nature, a nature introduced which gets the upper hand of the old. The old is there, but it is not now reigning. Sin has not dominion. There is another nature which rises up and meets the old. Something has happened, and in that something a position has been reached which is just this: that old nature is no longer the master. It has been crucified. It has been put into the place where it no longer dominates. It has come under the veto of the cross. How does it work? By the positive fact of a new nature introduced, the divine nature in Christ. It is not a constant effort to suppress the old, a struggle to say, No! It is that there is a positive factor which is working for us against the old. It does not mean that never at any time do we make a mistake, perhaps a slip, but we do know that there is a reactionary power at work within us now, which registers upon that old a veto and says with strength: "Thou shalt not". It is a new law, not imposed from without but the law of an inward power, a new nature within. As we walk in the Spirit that new nature grows and increases, and more and more gets the ascendancy over the old. Conformity to the image of God's Son is going on: a growing, an increase in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The flesh, with the affections and lusts thereof, under the power of the cross, and a new nature.

Look at the context of that last passage, and you will see a whole long list of the fleshly lusts and passions are mentioned, and over against that those things which are of the Spirit. The apostle says, in effect, to these believers: That is what is the true Christian life, and Judaism has nothing that can substitute that. It never deals effectively with the sin question; but by being crucified with Christ, and raised together with Him, the sin question is dealt with, and there is a settled registration in our very being that no longer is the old nature the only thing, the unrivalled nature, and the nature which has the upper hand; but the Spirit is making war upon the flesh.