

119

MINISTRIES

“The following is a direct script of a teaching that is intended to be presented via video, incorporating relevant text, slides, media, and graphics to assist in illustration, thus facilitating the presentation of the material. In some places, this may cause the written material to not flow or sound rather awkward in some places. In addition, there may be grammatical errors that are often not acceptable in literary work. We encourage the viewing of the video teachings to complement the written teaching you see below.”

Enslaved to Sabbaths and Festivals? (Galatians 4:8-11)

Should Christians observe the weekly Sabbath and the annual festivals like Passover and Pentecost? Well, if you ask Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—the answer would appear to be yes. In Matthew 5:17-20, Yeshua said that the whole Law of Moses will endure as long as heaven and earth exist and urged his followers to obey and teach even the least of the commandments. Hence, it stands to reason that Yeshua expected Christians to keep the commandments concerning the Sabbath and festivals.

However, not everyone agrees. Some say that Christians should no longer keep these commandments because of what Paul wrote in Galatians 4:8-11. In this passage, Paul rebukes the Galatians for observing “[days and months and seasons and years](#).” Here is what Paul says:

Galatians 4:8-11

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? **You observe days and months and seasons and years!** I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

As we can see, Paul condemns the observance of “[days and months and seasons and years](#).” He even states that observing these times is a form of idolatry. He accuses his readers of becoming enslaved again to false gods through their observance of these times. So, this is quite a big deal. Paul does not want the Galatians observing these “[days and months and seasons and years](#).”

What does Paul mean by this phrase? The standard antinomian interpretation is that Paul is referring to the appointed times commanded in the Torah. Antinomianism, which literally means “against law,” is a doctrine that states that Christians are freed from the obligation to obey the Law of Moses (Encyclopedia Britannica, “antinomianism,” britannica.com/topic/antinomianism). So, according to this interpretation, “days” refers to the weekly Sabbath, “months” refers to new moons, “seasons” refers to festival seasons, and “years” perhaps refers to the sabbatical year. In essence, it is argued that Paul condemns the entire biblical calendar in this verse.

But is Paul really condemning the biblical Sabbath, festivals, and so forth in Galatians 4:10? Or is he referring to something else? In this teaching, we will first explore why it is unlikely that Paul is condemning the observance of the biblical calendar. After that, we will provide an alternative interpretation of what exactly Paul means by “[days and months and seasons and years](#).”

Problems with the Antinomian Interpretation

Did Paul think that observing the Sabbath and festivals was a form of spiritual slavery that believers should avoid? That would be the implication if we understand “[days and months and seasons and years](#)” to be a reference to the biblical calendar. However, there are problems with that idea. We will mention two.

The first problem is that there is no evidence for it. The text never says that these days, months, seasons, and years come from the Law of Moses. Some have argued that, since Paul’s opponents that he writes against in the book of Galatians were Jewish, therefore the calendar he is condemning in Galatians 4:10 must be the Jewish calendar which contains the biblical times of worship. They say that Jews were pressuring the Gentile Galatians into observing that biblical calendar, and this is what Paul is speaking against. However, this idea is *just assumed*; it does not come from the text itself. As scholars widely acknowledge, there are only two places in Galatians that actually describe the message of Paul’s opponents: Galatians 1:6-9 and Galatians 6:12-13. In those two passages, we learn that Paul’s opponents were teaching a distorted gospel that involved getting circumcised to be saved (cf. Acts 15:1). So, the text itself does not actually state that Paul’s opponents were trying to impose the biblical calendar upon the Galatians, nor does it state that the Galatians were observing the biblical calendar simply because Paul’s opponents had pressured them into it. Those ideas are, once again, just assumed. We should be careful not to accept assumptions that can’t be supported by the text. As Justin Hardin writes:

[W]e would do well to heed the methodological guidelines of J. M.G. Barclay, who has warned that statements by Paul do not necessarily imply that the agitators were saying the opposite, or that the actions of the Galatians were necessarily directed by agitating hands.

—Justin K. Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult: A Critical Analysis of the First Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 119

Second, evidence from elsewhere in Scripture indicates that Paul was not at all opposed to the Sabbath and festivals or to Gentile believers observing them. In the books of Acts and 1 Corinthians, we see that Paul himself continued to observe the Sabbath and festivals alongside both Jewish and Gentile believers (Acts 13:14, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4; 20:6; 27:9; 1 Corinthians 16:8). As Hardin writes:

Paul was not at all critical of the Jewish calendar, but even continues to orient his life around it.

—Justin K. Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult: A Critical Analysis of the First Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 120

In fact, Paul explicitly instructs the Jewish and Gentile Christian community at the church of Corinth to celebrate Passover:

1 Corinthians 5:8

[Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.](#)

Now, some have tried to downplay the significance of Paul's instruction by arguing that Paul was telling the Corinthians to celebrate the festival only in a "spiritual" sense by living morally. However, there is strong biblical and historical evidence that Paul's instruction to celebrate the festival would have been taken quite literally. We go through that evidence in our teaching, **Celebrate the Festival: Christians and Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)**.

In any case, if Paul really believed that observing the Sabbath and festivals was equivalent to worshipping false gods, why would he observe those days himself and instruct the Corinthians to do likewise? That wouldn't make any sense.

Given the problems with the antinomian interpretation of Galatians 4:10, we should consider an alternative understanding of Paul's reference to "[days and months and seasons and years](#)."

Pagan Observances?

If the time references in Galatians 4:10 are *not* references to the biblical calendar, what does Paul mean when he rebukes the Galatians for observing "[days and months and seasons and years](#)"? Many scholars have proposed that Paul is actually referring to pagan observances. Significantly, this is not a new interpretation. We have evidence of this interpretation as early as the Ante-Nicene Church Father, Origen (See Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.21). As Hardin explains:

According to Origen's testimony, Celsus asserted that Christians should partake of the public pagan feasts because God is without envy or need. In response, Origen argues that because pagan feasts are contrary to the worship of God, Christians are correct to refrain from participation. In support of this position he then appeals to Paul by quoting Gal 4.10–11.

—Justin K. Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult: A Critical Analysis of the First Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 122

The idea that Paul refers to pagan observances in Galatians 4:10 makes sense in light of the immediate context. Two verses earlier, Paul identifies his readers as former pagans:

Galatians 4:8

[Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.](#)

Paul's Gentile readers lived within the Roman Empire and were thus legally obligated to participate in the imperial cult, which involved public festivals and sacrifices. These public celebrations were part of the civic calendar observed in Rome (Justin K. Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult: A Critical Analysis of the First Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 123-124).

Those who did not participate in these public festivals faced legal punishment. As D. Thomas Lancaster writes:

The God-fearing Galatian believers were, of course, ex-pagans who participated in the imperial cult, worshipping the gods and the emperors as required by law. This was a critically important part of their previous life, as much a center to their society as getting a driver's license and a Social Security number is to ours. Observing the calendar of the imperial cult was a required civic duty. To abstain from participation in these civic religious functions disrupted relationships with family, friends, business associates, and civic authorities.

—D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Holy Epistle to the Galatians: Sermons on a Messianic Jewish Approach* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2011), 205

The only way out of this legal obligation was to be an official member of the Jewish religion, which was exempt from participation in the imperial cult (See sources cited in Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 260-262).

This is an important point that we will revisit in a moment. But for right now, we should recognize that Paul identifies his readers as former pagans. He then says that they are *returning* to their former way of life:

Galatians 4:9-10

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you **turn back again** to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years!

Since Paul's readers are former pagans, it makes sense that the "**days and months and seasons and years**" that they are returning to are *pagan* festivals and practices. They cannot return to the biblical calendar because they did not keep the biblical calendar when they "**did not know God**" (Galatians 4:8); they are returning to the calendar that they observed when they were idol worshippers. Paul is not condemning the biblical calendar. He does not equate the observance of the Sabbath and biblical festivals with idolatry. He is warning his Gentile readers not to return to *actual* idolatrous practices.

While this interpretation makes sense in light of the immediate context, there is a question of how it relates to the broader context of Galatians. After all, throughout Galatians, Paul is trying to dissuade his Gentile readers from getting circumcised. Why? Because his opponents were saying that the Gentile believers must become Jews in order to be saved, and they taught that getting circumcised made them officially Jewish (cf. Acts 15:1). Paul argued that submitting to this false teaching undermined the gospel, which teaches that salvation and inclusion in Abraham's family is available to all who put their faith in the Messiah, whether Jewish or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised (Galatians 3:26-29).

So, given the broader context of Galatians and Paul's warnings against submitting to his Jewish opponents, why would Paul suddenly warn against returning to *paganism*? That doesn't seem to fit the rest of Paul's message in Galatians. However, when we look at the situation the Galatian Gentiles were in, we can understand why some of them may have felt that returning to pagan celebrations was their best option. Paul's readers were stuck between a rock and a hard place. Their options were to either become officially "Jewish" through circumcision so they could be exempt from having to participate in the imperial cult, or to turn back to observing pagan festivals. It would seem that members of the church of Galatia were considering *both* of these options. Some felt like they must submit to the false gospel of Paul's opponents, and others apparently went back to observing the days, months, seasons, and years of the imperial cult. Much of Galatians is addressed to those who were submitting to the false gospel of Paul's opponents, but Galatians 4:8-11 is addressed to those who were returning to the pagan Roman festivals.

Given the cultural context of Galatians, it is easy to understand why Paul's readers would be tempted to consider either of the options being presented to them. Either they could submit to a false gospel in order to avoid punishment for abstaining from Roman pagan practices, or they could continue the pagan practices in order to avoid punishment from Rome and avoid the false gospel. However, for Paul, both

of those options were unacceptable. Paul pleads with those considering both options to instead stay faithful to the Messiah despite the pressures they face from his Jewish opponents and from Rome. He calls them to stand firm on the truth of the gospel and be willing to suffer for their faith. He urges them not to get circumcised and submit to their Jewish opponents, and also not to participate in paganism and submit to their Roman opponents.

Conclusion

When Paul rebukes the Galatians for observing “[days and months and seasons and years](#)” in Galatians 4:10, he is not referring to the biblical Sabbath and festivals. This verse never explicitly mentions the biblical calendar. Also, Paul elsewhere endorses these biblical observances, so it wouldn’t make sense for him to condemn them in Galatians 4:10. A better interpretation of Galatians 4:10 is that Paul did not want his readers, who are former pagans (Galatians 4:8), to “[turn back again](#)” to their *pagan* observances—namely, the imperial cult. Paul encourages his readers to stay faithful to the Messiah and the true gospel despite the pressures of certain Jewish teachers as well as the Roman government. Paul does not condemn biblical observances in Galatians 4:10; he condemns *pagan* observances.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminatoTodo.net

TWITTER: [www.twitter.com/119Ministries#](https://twitter.com/119Ministries#)