

Don't Go Back

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of September 2003. The preacher is Danny Saunders.

His sermon is entitled Don't Go Back and is based on Galatians chapter 4 verses 8 to 20.

As we look through that together tonight, it's a great passage. As is all of Galatians really. It's been terrific to go through it together. We've had a few weeks off.

So we'll just sort of recap what we're up to. Paul's argument tonight in this passage is actually fairly simple. What you have after you've become a Christian is so good, why would you go back?

And Paul uses a before and after picture to make his point in this chapter. And we're all familiar with these sorts of before and after pictures. We saw some of them tonight. And we see them every day on TV, in magazines, everywhere.

[1 : 0 3] There's the endless diet before and after photos. There's the makeover before and after photos. The home improvement before and after photos. And of course the backyard blitz before and after.

That's probably my favourite. We saw it a little bit on the screen before. They were a bit small, but it sort of goes something like this. Backyard blitz have come in and your backyard was quite frankly a disgrace.

There was an overgrown jungle. There was a rotting fence. It was a disaster zone. There was no landscaping. There was no play equipment for the children. No outdoor entertainment area. And of course, perhaps the worst indictment, there was no backyard water feature.

Now this is the before picture. Then backyard blitz come in and do a makeover and somehow in this half hour episode, your backyard's turned into something straight out of house and garden.

It's superb. There's a water feature in everything. It's an amazing transformation. And this is sort of like Paul's argument in this passage. Now that you have the house and garden backyard, why would you go back to the overgrown jungle?

[2 : 1 7] You can just imagine the dismay of Jamie Drury and his crew. If the owner comes in and they're usually all in tears and can't believe the makeover that's happened, but they say, no, sorry, I like it the way it was.

I want to go back to the jungle. I prefer that. Take it all down. I'm not happy with this. I'm going back to the way it was. Well, that would be crazy, wouldn't it? It would just be amazing.

There's been an amazing transformation. No one would go back to the way it was before. You can just imagine the lady you saw up on the screen before after her plastic surgery.

She says to the surgeon, no, yes, I do look 30 years younger, but I want to go back. Thank you. I like the wrinkles. I want to go back to that. These things just wouldn't happen in our society, would they?

Well, this is sort of what the Galatians are doing. They have salvation in Jesus. They're no longer slaves, but they've become children of God.

[3 : 10] And they were choosing to go back to their old ways. Paul just couldn't believe that they would do this. Up until now in Galatians, Paul's been talking about how the Jews were once slaves under the law.

So that's their before picture. They were slaves under the law, the Jews. But then have a look in verse 5 of chapter 4. Jesus has been sent to redeem those under the law.

And Paul says, so we can receive adoption as children. Now, Paul's a Jew, so when he says we, he's including himself in this picture. And he's saying that the Jews can now be received, adopted as children of God.

Before, they were slaves under the law. After, they're adopted into God's family. They're children of God, no longer slaves. Then in verse 7, Paul gives the before and after picture of the Galatians.

He says, you are no longer slaves, but are also children of God. So adoption into God's family includes the Jews that believe in Jesus. They were once enslaved or bound by the Old Testament law.

[4 : 20] But now they can become children of God by faith in Jesus. And this adoption also includes the believing Gentile Galatians. They were once slaves, but now they're also counted as God's children.

Now, obviously, the Gentiles weren't Jews. So the Gentiles weren't slaves to the Old Testament law. So what Paul does here is he goes on to describe the Gentiles before and after picture.

These Gentile Christians were once enslaved. But not by the law, but by their own religions and their own philosophies and their own ideas. This is where we get to in tonight's passage.

In order to make his point of don't go back, Paul first sets out the Galatians before and after picture. And he does this in verses 8 to 11. Let's read those.

Now, Paul is contrasting these two pictures.

[5 : 54] This means that it's God's initiative. This is their amazing before and after transformation. Paul is contrasting these two pictures. Before they were slaves to spirits that weren't God's.

But now God's called them into a relationship with him. Now they know God and God knows them. So in making this contrast, Paul's really making his point.

This is Paul's big appeal. Galatians, look at the before and after picture. You were once slaves to beings that aren't God's. But now you know God.

And God knows you. Why would you go back to being slaves? Why exchange God's glorious salvation and freedom in Christ for your old slavery to weak and beggarly spirits?

Why be enslaved again when Jesus has set you free? In verse 10, Paul sees them observing special days and months and seasons and years.

[7 : 00] So in thinking they have to obey all these laws, they've exchanged the freedom that they have in Christ with legalism. Their once vibrant and life-giving faith has become a dreary routine.

Observing the right occasions and all the Jewish holidays and holy days. It's possible here that Paul's describing how embracing the teaching of the Judaizers that were seen throughout Galatians and the law that they were trying to impose on them meant they were coming under bondage to spirits.

Because in this form of legalism, the devil has twisted the law. So it's placed people under slavery. Now this is one way of reading the text at this point.

But I think Paul's really making the contrast between the Galatians' own before and after picture. These were Gentiles. In those days, Gentiles didn't naturally believe in one God who made everything.

This was the Jewish God. At this time, Gentiles didn't believe in this God. So before becoming Gentiles, sorry, Christians, they were pagans. And so they believed in many different gods, pagan gods and elemental deities or spirits.

[8 : 13] It's likely that these deities and spirits is referring to the signs of the zodiac. Star signs and elements in pagan thinking are the elements of the earth, the air, fire, water, those sorts of things.

And you probably add the sun and the moon to these things as well. So as pagans, before conversion, these Gentiles would have naturally, naturally, they would have used astrology and natural elements as part of their religious system.

Whatever God's name it was that they actually worshipped is part of that. And in verses 8 and 9, Paul describes these things as being no gods at all.

Paul sees them as useless and worthless. They're not gods. They're weak and beggarly spirits. They have no power or control over the world.

But they can enslave people who follow them blindly or follow them religiously. You might remember from Romans chapter 1 how the great sin of idolatry, worshipping of idols, is that we're worshipping the created things rather than the creator.

[9 : 26] The elements of nature, the stars, the sun and the moon, they're all made by our creator God. So it's God, the creator God, who we should worship.

So this sin of idolatry, like all sin, has the potential to enslave people and bind people. People get addicted to all sorts of things.

Sin can be addictive. And I imagine that an addiction to what we might regard as new age practices can be just as binding and enslaving for people. Especially when these practices are taken as religion and people actually worship these things.

Now a Christian has nothing to fear from these weak and false spirits. We worship the creator of the universe, not created things.

And on the cross, Jesus Christ defeated all the spiritual forces of the evil one. He's won the victory over them. But at the same time, don't be fooled into thinking that these types of things aren't real or that they don't pose any danger for us.

[10 : 36] Until Jesus returns, these weak and beggarly spirits have the power to enslave people. And also, don't be fooled into thinking that this letter has no relevance to us anymore.

In observing all the right occasions and days and festivals, their religion had become legalistic. And they were also risking falling back to the worship of pagan deities, star signs and the elements.

And we can see these problems in the church today and in our society today. So firstly, Christians can come under a similar bondage if they're tied to a legalistic Sabbath observance.

Or tied to observing a liturgical year or church calendar. Sure, come to church on Sunday, that's when we have church. But that's not the only day that you're a Christian.

Listen, if all your Christian devotion and practice only happens on a Sunday, then you're at a great risk of becoming a slave to this type of church attendance.

[11 : 48] If you're lulled into a false sense of security that coming to church on Sunday is all you have to do to be a Christian, then you're at risk of being enslaved by that very idea.

And you're not really living out the Christian life to its fullest. You're not a child of your parents only on Mother's Day or only on Father's Day or on their birthdays.

You're always a child of your parents. This is your status. And this is your status as a child of God as well. You're a child of God every day. Not just on Sunday and not just at Christmas.

So we need to live up to this status and live as children of God every single day. And secondly, pagan idol worship is everywhere in our society.

Look in any magazine or bookshop and you'll see all sorts of examples of these weak and beggarly elemental spirits. These things are worthless and useless. But more and more people in our society are becoming enslaved by these types of things.

[12 : 57] Now, people aren't walking around literally with chains all over them, but they're enslaved in the sense that they rely on, they live by, and they act according to the things that they trust and hope in.

Whether that's what the tarot cards might say, what a reading of their palms reveals, their lucky numbers, their horoscopes, crystals, or some spell or magic, people actually live by these things and are enslaved by them.

These things provide people with false security and false hope. But we shouldn't be opposed to these sorts of things any more than we're opposed to legalism.

They're great opportunities for Christians to talk to people that are into these things because usually they're interested in religion and spirituality. And this can open many doors to talking about Jesus.

Now, Ali, my fantastic wife, did a seminar at Deakin Uni on New Age beliefs and practices just a few weeks ago. And she left her notes behind.

[14 : 04] And someone, when she got her notes back a few days later, someone had written all over her notes discussing some of the points that she'd been raising in her seminar that was to Christians. To the comment that the New Age movement has no common or universal statement of belief or creed, this person wrote, Yes, there is.

Example, the presence of deity, spirit, and the power of the elements. Air, fire, water, earth. And then in some closing comments, this person wrote at the bottom of the whole thing, I worship, used loosely, personifications of chaos and order, the fixed and unfixable elements of existence.

I worship personifications of chaos and order, the fixed and unfixable elements of existence. So these things are around today.

If the person who wrote these things became a Christian, they would share the before and after picture of the Galatians. And we could say to these people, Don't go back to these things.

Look at what you have in Christ. And don't go back to these useless and worthless things. And if we try to apply these things to ourselves, we'll think about the sort of things that provide you with security.

[15 : 25] We might not be legalistic in this congregation. We might not be into new age things. But you're still in danger of being enslaved by the sin of idolatry when you place your trust in anything above God.

God should be number one in your life. Is your security in paying off your mortgage? Is it in having superannuation? A good income?

Or other investments? Is your security in having a good wardrobe? The latest fashions? The latest technology? Or a new car?

Do you hope in these things? Do you trust in them? Is that where your security lies? Don't be fooled. These things are just as enslaving and idolatrous as worship of worthless pagan spirits.

It's really scary to think that we might exchange what we have in knowing God and the security that we have in knowing God with these types of things.

[16 : 37] Paul's afraid for the Galatians. Have a look in verse 12. Paul was afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

Paul was afraid that they were falling back into their old ways and not living out their faith, trusting in Jesus alone. Paul was afraid that he had wasted his time in teaching them and telling them about Jesus.

What was the point of preaching salvation by sheer grace of God if you're going to go back and be enslaved by these worthless idols? You can just hear the echo of Paul's comments at the start of chapter 3.

Oh foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? You prefer to be slaves under the influence of the false teachers and the false gods even though you've come to know God?

Paul is shocked because he can't imagine why anyone would be so stupid. Once you lived and trusted in things that were created but now, now you know God.

[17 : 45] You've come to know God, the creator of the universe and he knows you. So don't go back to living in slavery to these things that are empty and fake.

Jesus has set you free and forgiven your sin. Now that you know the truth, Paul urges us in these words don't go back. Don't be corrupted by these things again.

Now you're in a precious relationship with God. And this is an amazing gift of God's grace. God knows you. This is God's initiative.

God's loving act of kindness to you. There's nothing more you have to do to earn your salvation. You simply have to trust God and receive Jesus by faith.

So as Paul goes on, he appeals to the Galatians with tenderness and with love. He's not just making an intellectual argument in this chapter. He's appealing to them as a pastor and as a friend.

[18 : 49] He says in verse 12, He calls them his friends, his brothers and sisters.

See, so far in Galatians, we've seen Paul as the apostle, as the great theologian, as the great defender of the gospel. But now we get another look at Paul's personality. We see Paul as a friend and as a passionate pastor, caring for their souls.

By become as I am, Paul means follow his example. Paul longed for them to become like him in his Christian life and faith. He wants them to share in his convictions about the truth in Jesus and the freedom that this brings.

Paul understands that as a follower of Christ, he didn't need to be enslaved by the Jewish law. Paul's affection and passion comes through because he's begging them to change.

So this isn't a command from a leader in authority way above them. It's the appeal of a friend. He's become like them. This is in the sense that Paul has also changed his status.

[19 : 56] He was once a Jew. He was in bondage to the law. But now he's been set free from the law. So Paul's become one of them. He hasn't kept his distance or kept himself apart because he's a Jew.

He's become one of them. He's not superior to them. He's a sinner needing salvation in Christ, just like they are. And so he appeals to them as equals, as one of them, as someone that knows that they're all one in Christ Jesus.

Paul goes on to talk about their attitude to him, which was also an attitude of affection and friendship that they shared in common. So in the rest of verse 12 to 16, he says, You have done me no wrong.

You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you. Though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

[21 : 04] Now we don't know for certain what Paul's illness was at this point. Verse 15 might suggest that Paul's physical illness was some sort of eye disease. But this might be just a figure of speech, a bit like us saying, I'll give you a hand.

We're not going to actually cut off our hand. It's just saying that we'll help out. But the point of what Paul is saying is that whatever his illness was, it didn't stop Paul from preaching the gospel and it didn't stop the Galatians from welcoming him and his message.

So even though he has some sort of illness that tested the Galatians, they didn't reject Paul. They welcomed him and they thought highly of him and his gospel message. In verse 14, Paul goes so far to say that he was received as an angel or even as Christ.

Well, this seems strange, almost blasphemous. But it shows Paul's confidence in who he was as an apostle of Jesus. Paul has said that he's become like them.

And we know that Paul saw himself as the chief of sinners. But he allows this idea because he was also an apostle of Jesus. He had the authority of Christ and he was sent on his mission by Christ.

[22 : 13] It was Christ that gave him his gospel. So it's okay for them to welcome him in this way because like an angel, he was a messenger from God. And as an apostle, he was Christ's personal representative.

He brought Christ's authority and his message. But Paul's basic point for all this is that they're friends. They welcomed him and loved him, even though strangers might have been repulsed by his illness and rejected him.

But they were on good terms. Paul has nothing against the Galatians. They've done him no wrong. He's not writing these things because he's angry at them or he's holding a grudge against them.

He's writing these things because he cares about their salvation. But now Paul asks in verse 15, What has become of this goodwill?

They used to be pleased to have Paul with them, but now Paul is concerned. Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? They received him as an angel of God, and now Paul wonders if he's become their enemy.

[23 : 19] Why has this happened? Well, it's because he's telling them to take a good, hard, long look at themselves. He's told them that they've deserted the gospel of grace and freedom, and they've turned back to slavery, to the worship of idols and worthless things.

So when they don't like his message, he's become their enemy. We all have to work hard at accepting advice from people, and even to accept criticism.

Proverbs says that a scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you, but the wise when rebuked will love you. When I first started working as a lawyer, one of the best bits of advice I got from the senior partner at our work was that life was not a popularity contest.

You see, a lot of the time people didn't like to receive legal advice, especially when you were telling them that the great tax-saving, money-saving venture that they've devised was actually illegal, and they couldn't do it.

People didn't like receiving that sort of advice. So Paul here wasn't popular with the Galatians because of his new advice he was giving that they didn't like.

[24 : 30] And there's plenty of people today that still don't like what Paul says. But thankfully, Paul wasn't trying to be popular. He knew that pleasing God was more important than pleasing people, and so he told them what they needed to hear.

And Paul hasn't stopped caring for them by saying this. Rather, he cares for them enough to tell them the truth. And he then goes on to contrast how he cares for the Galatians with how the false teachers treat the Galatians.

This is in the last verses, in verses 17 to 20. They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to exclude you so that you may make much of them.

It's good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.

I wish I was present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. Well, they here, they are the Judaizers, or the false teachers.

[25 : 36] Paul is saying that the false teachers are using flattery to get on side with the Galatians. So they're making a big deal about the Galatians to try and win them over to their cause.

They're sucking up to them, in other words. They're trying to win them over. And they don't have any good purpose in mind. Their real motive is to exclude the Galatians. This means they want to alienate the Galatians from the other Christians.

You see, if the Galatians become slaves to the Jewish law and tradition, they'll be excluded from the freedom that they should have in Christ. And they'll set themselves apart from the other Christians.

They'll be divided, and so they'll be excluded from the real body of Christ. And the false teachers think that once they win them over, once they're slaves to their way of thinking, then the Galatians will make much of them.

In other words, they'll think that the false teachers are pretty good because they got it right. And so the false teachers are thinking of their own following and their own prestige and their own status. They want to be seen as important leaders of the people when they're really leading the Galatians astray.

[26 : 43] When Christians are free in Christ, we're not slaves to our human teachers. But if Christianity is turned into rules and regulations or the strict following of a liturgical year or a calendar, then people can become slaves to that religion, and they might see themselves as less important than the priest or the minister.

Paul shows us how this is wrong. He's already reminded them that he's become like them. They're equal in Christ Jesus. And now he describes his own attitude to them, which is very different to the false teachers.

Paul's love and pastoral concern for them is obvious. Firstly, in verse 18, Paul's saying there that he wants to encourage and compliment the Galatians. But he wants to do so for a good purpose, not for empty flattery.

He wants them to be enthusiastic and passionate about the gospel and their faith, whether he's there with them, around them, teaching them, or whether he's not. Then Paul calls them his little children, and he describes himself as their mother.

This just shows how much he cares for them, how much he's prepared to suffer for them. You see, Paul's not satisfied that they've been converted. He wants to see Christ actually formed in them.

[28 : 04] In other words, the Galatians becoming Christians is one thing. But Paul, the pastor, wants to see them go on, wants to see them mature in their faith.

That's the aim of the Christian life. It's not just about becoming a Christian. It's about running the race, maturing in your faith, having Christ formed in you.

And this means becoming like Christ. This is the goal of the Christian life, that Jesus is formed in you, that you become like Christ.

Paul agonizes over them for this result. He describes his agonizing and pain over them as like the pangs of childbirth. We'll have to ask Helen about that over coffee.

And notice in verse 19 that he's again in childbirth over them. What this means is he's already had labor over them previously at their conversion. But now they're backsliding and falling away has caused him to agonize over them all over again.

[29 : 10] He's laboring over them again as this time he longs that Christ is truly formed in them. He's puzzled and he's confused. He's perplexed that they would risk falling away back into slavery now that they've become children of God.

He wishes he could see them face to face so he could change his tone. But for now he's puzzled and wants to warn them. Remember who and what you are.

You're children of God, free in Christ. Don't go back again to that old slavery in which you used to live. So this passage is a good example for how Christian leaders should relate to people in their care.

The false teachers, they wanted to dominate the Galatians but Paul longs for Christ to be formed in them. The false teachers are acting from selfish motives regarding their own prestige and their own position.

Paul is prepared to sacrifice himself for them to be in the pain of childbirth over them until Christ is formed in them and their faith matures.

[30 : 25] And this passage shows us that a Christian believer isn't someone who just professes faith but someone who's being transformed every day into the likeness of Christ.

Now this is going to involve holding firm to the gospel and growing and maturing in your faith by building on your relationship with God.

Knowing God more and more each day through prayer, reading and studying the Bible and serving God and his people, meeting with each other. We're meant to be servants of God and Christ and servants of each other.

And this is because we belong to God and we want to serve him and his people. This kind of service is freedom because our salvation doesn't depend on it. It doesn't depend on this sort of service.

Our salvation doesn't depend on meticulous obedience to the law and so slave-like service, hoping we do enough or do things good enough for God, this is slavery to good works.

[31 : 26] The freedom of the gospel is that our salvation rests on what Jesus has already done for us on the cross. Our salvation depends only on the death of Jesus on the cross and when he's rising again to new life to defeat sin and death.

There's nothing more we're required to do for our salvation. Jesus has already done all of it for us. So don't be a religious person in bondage to your religion.

If you're coming to church to fulfil your Christian duty and service, you're horribly mistaken. You can do many religious duties. Christian service is about becoming like Christ, being selfless and seeking to serve God and other human beings.

And the motivation for this must come only from the gratitude that you have in your heart, that wretched and depraved and full of sin, though you are, God in his mercy has made himself known to you and saved you.

So this means we want to do things in Christian service. It doesn't mean we won't do them. The purpose of daily Bible reading and prayer and coming to church is that so you as a Christian can remember who and what you are and so that Christ can be formed in you.

[33 : 06] So this passage has been a reminder of the true status of a Christian as a child of God and a reminder of the responsibility that we have to move on with Jesus, to have Christ formed within us rather than slipping back into old patterns or old behaviours or old sins.

Jesus has dealt with these and done away with them. Don't become slaves to these again. If we remember what we once were, and what we are now will have an increasing desire within us to live according to what we are and that's God's children set free by Christ.

So think about how you were before you became a Christian. Before you responded to the good news about Jesus.

What's your own before and after picture? If you don't have a before and after picture and you're not a Christian or you're unsure whether you're a Christian, then my prayer for you and what I encourage you to pray is that you would come to know Jesus.

That he would set you free from whatever you're a slave to. That you would accept the forgiveness of sins that he offers you. And that you would come to know God and God would know you and Christ would be so formed in your life that you would never go back.

[34 : 36] So what's your before and after picture? Before becoming a Christian I worshipped created things rather than the creator. Whether it was supermodels, the right friends, alcohol, sport and fitness, having money and being accepted by the crowd, a life lived trusting in these things for peace and security is a life being enslaved to things that are weak and worthless.

This is worship of created things not the creator. I thank God that he set me free in Jesus so I'm no longer a slave to these types of things.

Can you relate to that type of before and after picture? Or were you somebody who thought you were a Christian? Perhaps you've always been a very good and righteous and upright person.

You followed all the right rules and observed all the right days but now you've come to understand that your salvation is by faith in what Jesus has done for you and you can't earn this or do anything for it.

Is this your picture? Or were you someone that was tied to crystals and guidance from your star sign or some other new age practice or belief or even some other religion that had you worshipping actual idols?

[35 : 58] Things that were made by humans and not the creator? What's your before and after picture? Whatever it is praise God that you now know him and he knows you.

You're in the most precious and important relationship that you'll ever have. Remember who and what you are. you're a child of God set free in Christ Jesus.

So don't go back to your former way of life. Don't be a lazy Christian and let those things slip. Don't go back to slavery to worthless things.

But continue on with God. Live with him each day. Serve him in whatever you do and seek to grow in your understanding of the Bible and in your knowledge of God and do these things until Christ is formed in you.

Thank you.