

No Going Back

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you very much, Alice, for reading that for us. And I just want to add my welcome to all the other welcomes that have been offered already this morning. It's really good to have you all with us today. As Alice said, my name is Craig, and I'm a pastor in training here at Brunsfield.

And it is a real pleasure to take us into the next part of Galatians. So do keep your Bibles open. We're going to keep referring to quite a few verses on the way through this passage.

But I wonder, to begin, and I don't apologize for making this link. This is very prevalent in our minds, especially this week. I wonder if you can imagine what it's like to be a hostage.

It must be a totally awful existence, taken into captivity violently, suffering terribly, held against your will, and being separated from your loved ones.

Now, keep imagining with me, you are a hostage this morning, but one day you get the news that you're going to be released. You're going to be returned home.

[1 : 08] And you're going to taste that sweet freedom once again. How thrilling to get that news. But soon after, once you've returned home, once life is getting back to normal again, you decide you want to return back to captivity and become a hostage again.

Returning to that same darkness, starvation, slavery, and ill treatment that you suffered before. It would be utter madness to choose to go back into captivity, don't you think?

To throw away your freedom and to return to slavery. Well, this is the very thing that the Galatian Christians are at risk of doing.

In this passage, Paul says, Paul warns them that by beginning to observe the Jewish law, adding Jewish rules and traditions to their existing Christian faith, faith, it's as some people are encouraging them to do.

It's like choosing to become a slave once again, returning to the hostage cell, returning to the very things that Jesus had already rescued them from.

[2 : 24] But it would also be like us returning to the sins that we were once enslaved to, the things that Jesus had freed us from. In fact, if we turn to any of the things that pull us like magnets away from Jesus, if we give into their magnetic pull and forsake Jesus and his love for us that we've just been singing about, it would be like us returning to our hostage cell.

So Paul is baffled that the Galatians are already starting to do this. They're already starting to turn to a different gospel. A false gospel where believing in Jesus is not enough to be saved.

But in our passage, after reminding us of the tremendous privileges that we have as a Christian, we thought about that last week. Paul warns us that we are fools if we ever even consider throwing it all away.

Now, I wonder if you notice the really strong language in this passage. Paul is not holding back. He says some things like this. I fear I've wasted my efforts with you.

I plead with you, brothers and sisters. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? I am in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.

[3 : 50] How I wish I could be with you and change my tone because I'm perplexed by you. Paul is really distressed. But what is Paul seeking to communicate to readers of this letter?

And that includes us today. It's this. Departing from the gospel and forsaking our relationship with God will only lead us back into captivity.

Instead, what does Paul want for his readers? What transformation does he seek in their lives? That we might remember what we've been saved from, what we've been saved to, and zealously pursue above all things the likeness of Jesus forming in us.

This is what Paul longs to take place in the lives of Galatians. And until that happens, until Christ is formed in them, until Jesus, they look more and more like Jesus.

Until that happens, Paul waits in anguish, like a mother giving birth to a child. So we're going to look at how Paul seeks to persuade the Galatians to stick with Jesus and not return to captivity.

[5 : 03] And we're going to do this in two parts this morning. So we're going to look at verses 8 to 11, first of all, remembering our past, and verses 12 to 20, remembering our commitment.

So remembering our past, first of all, verses 8 to 11. So Paul wants to remind the Galatians of their past, what they have been saved from, and what they've been saved to.

In verse 8, Paul reminds them that formerly, you had no knowledge of God. Now, it's possible to know things about God, but to not know him personally.

That's an important distinction to be aware of. It's possible to know things about God, but to not know him personally. Before they heard the good news about Jesus, these Galatians had neither knowledge of the Christian God, nor a personal relationship with him.

They had neither. They had no knowledge of God. Next, Paul reminds the Galatians that they were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

[6 : 19] He describes these things elsewhere as weak and miserable forces. That's in verse 9. Those who by nature are not gods, those weak and miserable forces.

Now, some commentators translate these spiritual forces as demonic forces, which I think is plausible.

Before the Galatians came to know the resurrected Jesus personally, while they were still serving their pagan gods, maybe the sun or the moon or the things in nature or any other idol, Paul explains that they were in fact serving.

Demons. Now, this stacks up with Paul's teaching in other places in the New Testament, like in 1 Corinthians chapter 10. You might want to check these places out later.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul describes that offering, pagan sacrifices are offerings to demons and not to God. And in Ephesians chapter 2, he also talks about that before we were Christians, we were dead.

[7 : 28] And whether knowingly or unknowingly, we were followers of Satan. The Galatian Christians have been saved, not just from an ignorance of God, but they'd also been freed from slavery to Satan.

But what have they been saved to? Well, Paul says in verse 9, now that you know God, you know him as Lord, as your saviour, as your father, as your friend, and your helper, you're not ignorant of him anymore.

But even greater than that, we are known by God, he says. We are known by God. We've been saved into an intimate, loving relationship with God himself, a close spiritual union with him, where we get to share in all the blessings of Jesus and share in his spirit.

Now, last week in verses 1 to 7, Ian took us there, and he reminded us that Christians, on believing in Jesus, have become God's very own children. They've been adopted into his family.

They have received his Holy Spirit. And this same Holy Spirit enables Christians to call out to God as our Abba or our Daddy. It's really affectionate language.

[8 : 50] And because we have been made sons, so legal heirs, this means that we have become heirs of a great inheritance, which is waiting for us.

So these are all the amazing benefits and blessings that we have been saved to. So yes, what we've been saved from?

Slavery to sin, slavery to the enemy, Satan himself, slave to an amazing, intimate connection with God himself, a loving relationship with him, where we know him, and he knows us.

Now, Paul asks, why on earth would you throw all of this away and walk back into slavery? In fact, in verse 10, Paul criticizes them for observing special days and months and seasons and years.

And he doesn't shed any further light on what these things might be, what they might be referring to, but they might be rules about the Sabbath or about certain festival days or months. And there might be rules about certain things you can and you cannot do on those days or certain things you can or can't eat or drink or dress.

[10 : 07] Whatever these things might be referring to, I think it is shorthand for following the Jewish religion to a T. So following all the rules and the traditions and customs of Judaism.

But what is really shocking about what Paul is saying here is that he is, he says that adding Judaism onto Christianity is like going back to pagan idolatry and demon worship.

He makes that connection. And Paul is so strong on this because he realizes that adding more stipulations to our faith implies that your faith in Jesus' saving work on the cross is not enough.

It's not enough to save us from our faith. If we think that we need more than what the gospel tells us, it means that we think that what the gospel tells us about what Jesus did on the cross, we believe that it's not enough.

By following these Jewish laws, the Galatian Christians might as well have walked back into their hostage cell. Now, the message of the letter of Galatians is this, and we've been thinking about this all the way through our series so far.

[11 : 21] What is the main message of the letter of Galatians? It's that justification is by faith alone, through grace alone, and in Christ alone.

And in other words, what that means is that God declares us to be righteous or holy when we believe in the saving work of Jesus on the cross and this is a free gift of grace that he offers to us.

There are no other means by which we'll be declared right in God's eyes. No other means. So, remember your past.

Secondly, remember your commitment, your former commitment. And we're looking at verses 12 to 29. Now, so Paul wants the Galatians to remember their former commitment in these verses, but their commitment to what?

What commitment? To Paul's gospel message, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, Paul shares a story in verses 12 to 16.

[12 : 29] You can scan your eyes back over those verses again. And in this story, in these verses, he's criticizing the Galatians for doing a complete U-turn on him and his gospel.

In verse 13, we see that they had originally become acquainted with Paul when he came to their area and he first preached the gospel to them. This was when he first, they first met each other.

And he says that this was a period of unspecified physical suffering for him. He was suffering from some sort of ailment. We don't know what exactly.

But what we do know, what he says here, is that it also proved to be a trial for the Galatians as well. Whatever he was suffering from, it was a real burden on them. But instead of despising him or telling him to leave or, you know, you're just burdening us too much here, Paul, they held him in such high regard.

They welcomed him as if he was an angel. They welcomed him as if he was Jesus Christ himself rocking up in their town. They held him in such high regard. They loved Paul even when he was sick and he had loved them back.

[13 : 41] Such was their commitment to Paul that they were willing to give Paul their very eyes. It's quite a strange image, but I think it simply conveys how committed to Paul they were.

They were like sports players who put their bodies on the line. They give everything for their managers and their fans. They were willing to give Paul their very eyes for him.

Now though, in verse 15, Paul questions, where has your love and your commitment and your blessing for me, where has it gone? It has completely evaporated.

They've done a U-turn on him. I wonder if you've ever experienced knowing somebody, spending time with them, loving them, just someone that you got on really well with, but they suddenly drew back from you.

They suddenly gave you the cold shoulder. It's a hurtful thing to experience, but it also leaves us asking ourselves, why have they done that?

[14 : 47] Why have they suddenly drawn back from me? Have I done anything? Have I done anything wrong to offend them? After loving Paul so much, the Galatians have drawn back from him.

We've seen an example of this behavior already in Galatians. I wonder if it's ringing any bells. In chapter 2, we saw the story of Peter suddenly drawing back from spending time with and eating with the Gentile Christians.

And this was to save face in front of those false Jesus plus teachers. But why have the Galatians done a U-turn on Paul and his gospel message of Jesus?

Well, I think there's a couple of clues. We see the first in verse 16, he asks the question, have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? Concerningly, the Galatians no longer seem to be able to stomach Paul's teaching of the truth, the hard, corrective truths of the Bible.

They don't seem to be able to handle it. Now, when we become Christians, we are not just recipients of all the wonderful benefits of Christ when we're united to him, but we are also conformed into the likeness of Jesus so that we more and more live like him and behave like him and are true representatives of him on earth.

[16 : 23] This is an external process. God conforms us into the image of his son. It can be, but when this happens, when we are conformed into his image, it can be painful.

It can be hard to stomach. We don't like it. It exposes us when God shows us our sin, when he shows us the things that we, he wants us to turn from.

There's a pressure within us to disobey, to protect ourselves from the exposing truth of the gospel. It can be a temptation to treat our pastors or our teachers as enemies, as thrills, thrill seekers, not thrill seekers, the opposite of that, wishing to spoil our fun.

We can have contempt for those people that show us what God wants to expose in our lives. It can be tempting within to push it away, but Paul says, remember, your former commitment to me and my gospel message, you held closely to it, you believed in it, you were on side with me.

Now, let us not cast aside or withdraw from those who call on us to obey the gospel and walk more closely with Christ. So that's the internal pressure.

[17 : 48] There's an internal pressure to not withstand the truth of the Bible, but in the Galatians case, there was also an external pressure from the so-called agitators, these are the ones who've come into the Galatian churches and they've been meddling with the gospel ever since Paul first visited them and brought them the good news about Jesus.

And these agitators have been throwing the Galatians into confusion. They're the ones that have been telling the Galatians that their faith in Jesus is not enough to save them. They need to add on these other things, these Jewish traditions and rules.

Now, when I was thinking about these agitators, it was reminding me of how I loved, as a kid, we had a wee dog and he was fine to be off the lead and he would just potter around and do his own thing.

But meanwhile, as I was out with the dog as a wee boy, I would go to the puddles and I'd take a stick and I'd love to stir up all the mud in the bottom of the puddles and cause the puddle to be all cloudy.

And I think this is exactly what these agitators do. They come in, they stir up all the good gospel foundations that have been settled, they've been established in the gospel churches and they're throwing these Galatian Christians into confusion.

[19 : 10] But Paul says a little more about what these people are doing. He says in verse 17 that they are zealous to win over the Galatians to their cause, but for no good intention.

The ESV translation says, they make much of you. It seems these agitators might have been flattering the Galatians. They've been working hard, they've been working zealously to win them over to their rival cause.

Think of the politicians on the campaign trail in a time of election, they're going around knocking on every door in the neighbourhood and they're trying to persuade people to switch allegiance from that rival party to their party.

Paul says the goal of these agitators is to alienate the Galatian Christians from Paul, to break them away from Paul, to turn them away from the gospel message that he brought to them.

And we've seen that their tactic is working. It is already working, they're already starting to turn away. And this is why Paul is so worried about them. This is why he's using such strong language.

[20 : 21] They've begun to turn away from the true gospel message of Jesus. Now, it probably wouldn't be true to say that we have this same sort of obvious infiltration issue affecting our message at the moment in Brunfield and we thank the Lord for that and we praise God.

But I'd say that cautiously because no Christian church is immune to infiltration and agitation. So we must be on our guard against anybody or anything that wishes to drag us away from Jesus.

For the Galatians, it should have been obvious that these agitators were not true messengers from God. How can we tell? How can we tell if they were true messengers or not?

I think it's by looking at whose kingdom they were seeking to build. Was their goal to build Jesus' kingdom amongst the Galatians or was it to build their own kingdom?

Just like the Pharisees in Jesus' day who were jealous of Jesus' influence and his following that he had, these men wished to become big first century influencers like Paul and to build up their own big following.

[21 : 42] They do not have true intentions. They're not seeking to build Jesus' kingdom. So, we've identified the Galatians problem. We've seen that they're so quickly turning away from the gospel message.

They've been turned by internal and external forces and they're picking up additional laws and rules that they think are going to truly save them.

And Paul has said that this is like going back to pagan idolatry and demon worship. But what is Paul's remedy?

What is his remedy for these Galatians that are starting to turn away? Well, it's to remember their past, what they've been saved from. It's to remember what they've been saved to, to remember their former commitment to this gospel message.

But more than that, I think there's one more thing. And this, up to this point in this letter, there haven't been too many direct instructions, imperatives for the Galatians.

[22 : 45] But we see a call to action in verse 12. Paul says, I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you.

What does Paul mean? Become like me. What does he mean by that? Well, I think in the same way that Paul has cast off his former identity in this religion that he no longer calls his own.

He's cast off his Judaism and become like a Gentile among them. So they too are to cast off the Jewish traditions and the practices that they have added on, all these other things that they've added on, these things that cannot save them.

Instead, just as Paul has done when he left Judaism behind, just as he embraced Jesus alone when he became a Christian, they are to do the same.

He says, Galatians, match my wholehearted pursuit of Jesus alone. Embrace his sometimes painful conforming work in your hearts.

[23 : 55] Seek the building up of his kingdom, nothing else. Now the graphic childbirth image that we see in verse 19, it reminds us of how desperately Paul wants to see the Galatians being formed into Jesus' likeness and he will wait in anguish until that takes place.

That is what he wants more than anything else. Now, I'm just drawing things to a finish here, but as we finish, I wonder if you've ever watched any films that are set in space.

I saw Stephen smiling there. There are so many great space films. I'll name a few. The Martian, Interstellar, 2001, A Space Odyssey, WALL-E, and of course the Star Wars franchise of which I'm a big fan.

And I don't think there are any space films, well there might be one or two, but there are no space films which don't feature some sort of gravity calamity. For example, our hero's spaceship passes too close to a planet and it gets sucked into its orbit.

Or our hero's spaceship passes too close to a black hole and begins to get sucked towards it. Or our hero's ship comes within range of a Star Destroyer and gets sucked in by a tractor beam.

[25 : 23] More seriously though, I wonder if there's anything tugging on you this morning, trying to pull you away from Jesus. Or maybe somebody or something is slowly but steadily courting you away from Jesus.

A real life or a metaphorical agitator perhaps, the pleasures and the temptations of the world, or maybe the worries of our world, or old sins that we're tempted to go back to.

We all, whether we're Christians here or not, we all feel the pull sometimes, but we must resist it. Remember Paul's remedy.

We must heed his desperate call to become like him, discarding every rival affection and prioritizing Jesus and being transformed into his likeness.

does Jesus have any rivals in our hearts? Are you zealously pursuing him even when nobody is looking?

[26 : 40] Departing from Jesus and forsaking his tremendous love for us will only lead us back to our hostage cell. let us daily commit ourselves to him, asking him to help us identify the things in our hearts which are vying to take his place.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the message of Galatians. We thank you that there is no other way to be saved than by trusting in Jesus alone and his death on the cross to pay for our sins.

We thank you for the amazing sacrifice that he has performed in our behalf and that by trusting in him alone, by believing in what he has done for us, that we can be called children of God, adopted into our family, heirs, awaiting an inheritance.

We thank you that you've given us your Holy Spirit as well to enable us to walk in your ways. We thank you that you zealously try to conform us into your likeness.

We thank you that you're actively doing that by your Spirit, making us into Jesus' likeness. Would you help us not to resist that? But instead, would you help us to cling to Jesus, to keep seeking him in your word, to keep praying, to keep walking in his ways?

[28 : 09] And Lord, please help us. Please show us the things in our lives that are vying to take Jesus' place on the throne of our hearts. Show us the things that are creeping in. Show us the things that you want us to resist and turn from.

And we thank you that you've not left us alone to fight these things alone, but you've given us your Spirit to do so. So please, give us your strength this day and help us to commit ourselves to you once again.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.