

March 11, 2007

## “Why We Can’t Go Back” Galatians 2:17-21

FCF: Tendency to drift from “the solas”

**PROPOSITION:** (magnet) Because of these very real things that have occurred,  
(anchor) we cannot go back to living by the law.

### **SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Recent sports headline: Alaska, “*Iditarod Musher Found*” – A rookie Iditarod musher turned up on the wrong trail, hours after she was believed to be missing along a treacherous stretch. Deborah Bicknell, 61, of Juneau was spotted from the air driving her team on a trail through Ptarmigan Pass. “*It appears she took the wrong trail.*” Indeed. She was 18 miles from where she was supposed to be. Recognize, though, that a marker had been knocked down which threw her off. So it was understandable and excusable.

But what if it was still there? What if the trail markers were plain and well known but we insisted on ignoring them anyway? That would hardly be so excusable. Or understandable. And, given the topic Paul is addressing, all the more harmful.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** Galatians 2:15-21

### **PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

### **SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

There are times and situations in which you cannot give up. You cannot go back. This past week saw the 171<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Alamo. The Mexican general Santa Anna and his army of over 2,000 against a ragtag force of less than 200, led by Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, William Travis, and no few Tennessee Volunteers. They held for 13 days. And then the walls were breached. The defenders were killed. Only the civilians inside survived. But their bold sacrifice became the rallying cry for the rest of the Texans. “*Remember the Alamo!*” – a call to never give up, to never go back.

Paul is calling his readers to do the same – to remember the very real things that have occurred and to be resolutely determined not to go back. To press on away from the old life of living under the tyranny of the law and to press forward in the freedom of living by grace. The gospel of justification – of how we can be made right with God – was under attack. Paul has made it clear it is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The Westminster Shorter Catechism sums it up so beautifully ([READ WSC:33](#)):

*What is justification? Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.*

We spoke of this last week and the implications. But then Paul follows ([READ Galatians 2:17-18](#)). As he does elsewhere, Paul anticipates an argument to what he has said and then refutes it. In this case, his thought goes like this: “*If we have given up hope of being made right with God by works and are no longer preaching and practicing these Jewish laws (especially circumcision and the table rules), has that led us into sin, as our opponents would claim? No! It's hardly a sin to free oneself from legalism and self-righteousness! But if I went back, that's what would then make me a sinner.*”

We cannot go back, Paul is saying. Because of what has happened, because of these astonishing things that have taken place, we cannot go back to living under the tyranny of the law. Now, what is it that has taken place? Paul unpacks this for us.

### **I. BECAUSE WE DIED TO THE LAW**

Three things have taken place, constraining us not to go back. The first is the fact that, if we have put our hope in Christ, we have died to the law ([READ Galatians 2:19](#)).

### A) *How It Happened*

What is Paul saying here? How can we be dead to the law through the law?

#### 1. Revealing who he was

What Paul is saying is that the law revealed him for who he really was – not a law-keeper but a law-breaker, not a lover of God but a rebel against God.

#### 2. Revealing his need of Christ

It revealed what was twisted, crooked within him – his sinful nature – breaking the back of his self-confidence, his self-righteousness. Revealing his heart and his need of Christ.

### B) *What It Means*

In that sense and in that sense only could the law “save” him – by showing him he couldn’t obey it. And what did this mean? What were the implications?

#### 1. Could not rely on justification by law

It meant he could not rely on being justified, on being made right with God, through the law. Peace could not come based on what he had done, could do, or ever would do.

#### 2. Had to rely on justification through faith

It meant that, renouncing all that, turning his back on all that, he then put all his trust not in his works, in his labors for God, but in God’s works, God’s labors for him in Christ.

#### *Illustration:*

Here’s the picture of how the law is to work. Think of a railroad track, guiding our obedience. The engine moving us along the track is God’s grace. But this way of living is so uncomplimentary to our prideful egos. “*God has to do everything for us? That hardly seems reasonable.*” And so Paul’s opponents, the Judaizers, took the track, lifted it up on end, leaned it against the door of heaven, and turned it into a ladder for us to climb. “*Ah, now that’s more like it!*” And what Paul is saying here is, “*No! I’ve torn that ladder down, put it back as a track, and that’s where it’s going to stay!*”

#### *Application:*

And this is the very thing we must do. We must let the law do its work, the way it’s supposed to do its work – as a railroad and not a ladder. You’re skeptical about your need for the gospel? Throw yourself into trying to obey the law. Obey the law! But beware. This is not for the faint of heart. It will show you things you didn’t know were there. It will kill you. And that’s Paul’s point. He had died to the law through the law.

## **II. BECAUSE WE DIED WITH CHRIST**

He could not go back to life under the law because he had died to the law. He had died to the law. And he had died with Christ (**READ Galatians 2:19-20**). He had died with Christ. The obituary was written. Now we see the circumstances of his demise.

### A) *Our Union with Him*

And the circumstances of Paul’s demise were his union with Christ. This is terminology that occurs repeatedly in the New Testament, even in this letter (**READ Galatians 1:22; 2:4; 2:17a**). This is extremely significant. What does it mean?

#### 1. What it does not mean

Understand, first, Paul is not speaking in terms of an analogy. He is not saying, “*It’s as though I was crucified with Christ.*” Nor is he speaking of some form of mysticism where Christ lives through him as though Paul was merely an empty vessel.

#### 2. What it does mean

This is not an analogy. This is a reality. By faith we are made one with Christ.

### B) *The Effect upon Us*

And the effect? Everything Christ has done becomes something we have done.

1. His death is our death

His death is our death (**READ Galatians 2:20a**). Four things were nailed to the cross – Jesus Himself, the public pronouncement, the debt of our sin. And we ourselves.

2. His life is our life

We ourselves. Because of this union with Christ, our being united to Him, His death is our death. And His life is our life (**READ Galatians 2:20**). His Spirit indwells us, working, living within us – “the life of God in the soul of man” as Henry Scougal put it.

A dramatic change has taken place. A new principle governs us. A new power and presence within us. We are no longer who and what we once were. A great change.

*Illustration:*

Think of the movie, “Air Force One.” The President of the United States is taken hostage as terrorists hijack his official jet. Drawing on his former military experience, he subdues the hijackers one by one. But as the plot unfolds, there is no one who can fly the plane. So a daring rescue is made – attaching a zip line from Air Force One to a military transport plane. All the passengers make it over, leaving the president and one terrorist. A struggle ensues, the president escapes, and his plane crashes into the ocean. Officials on the ground are waiting, waiting to hear some report. Finally, the flight crew radios in, “*Liberty 2-4 is changing call signs. Liberty 2-4 is now Air Force One!*” The identity of that simple transport plane was dramatically changed because of who was on board.

*Application:*

And so it is with us. If you have placed your faith in Christ, you have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer you who live but Christ who lives in you. You died to the law, giving up on it. And you are a new person. You haven’t been just slapped with a different cosmetic label. It’s a new life, a whole new life that demands and allows a whole new way of seeing, of living. You can’t go back. You died with Christ!

**III. BECAUSE HE DIED FOR US**

You died to the law. You died with Christ. And He has died for you (**READ Galatians 2:20b-21**). Think of what Paul is saying. Here I find this quote by the great 4<sup>th</sup> century preacher, John Chrysostom, so insightful (**READ Chrysostom quote**):

*How could an act so great, so awesome and surpassing human reason be to no purpose? How could a mystery so ineffable, for which the prophets yearned in travail, the patriarchs foresaw and the angels were astonished to behold, acknowledged by all as the crown of God’s loving care – how could one say that this was vain and futile?*

*A) Not an Abstraction*

Christ’s death was not abstraction. This is not some vague ethereal theory.

1. Right theology vital

Yes, it’s the stuff of theology and having theology right is absolutely vital. That’s clear.

2. But so too is belief

But so too is having our belief. Of the heart moved and swayed by our theology.

*B) But an Affection*

What Paul is speaking of here is no abstraction. It is passionate affection moved to painful sacrifice. Passionate affection moved to painful sacrifice.

1. Who Paul is speaking of

Who is being spoken of? The Son of God – the eternal second person of the Trinity incarnate – come to earth, taking on flesh, made man with all our finite frailties.

2. What He has done

And what has He done? He has “given Himself” – terminology that surely would have reminded Paul’s readers of the prophet Isaiah’s words of the suffering servant.

3. And for whom

And for whom? Listen to the personal pronouns here, the passion with which Paul surely is writing these words (**READ Galatians 2:20b**). There is wonder in these words.

Christ having given so very much for His own. So very much for His very own.

*Illustration:*

True story. It was 1868. Emperor Theodore III of Ethiopia held a group of 53 European captives in a remote 9,000-foot-high bastion deep in the interior. Queen Victoria had pleaded with Theodore for their release. Finally, the government ordered a full-scale military expedition from India to march into Ethiopia – not to conquer the country and make it a British colony, but simply to rescue a tiny band of civilians.

Listen to what they sent. The invasion force included 32,000 men, heavy artillery, and 44 elephants to carry the guns. Provisions included 50,000 tons of beef and pork and 30,000 gallons of rum. Engineers built landing piers, water treatment plants, a railroad, and telegraph line to the interior, plus many bridges. All of this to fight one decisive battle, after which the 53 prisoners were released, and everyone packed up and went home. The British expended millions of pounds to rescue but a handful of captives.

*Application:*

So very much for their very own. How much more what we read here. Understand Jesus did this with our names in mind. Luther wrote so passionately here in his commentary one cannot help but think it had to have had much to do with his own passion for the gospel. Let us do what he did, what Paul did – apply this to ourselves, reading our own names here. Consider your value to Him that He would give Himself for you. Consider His interest in you, the security you have in His care. This is precious and precious indeed. To see how He sees us and to live lives grounded in these realities.

**CONCLUSION:**

Hear me. With all of this in mind – our having died to the law, our having died with Christ, His having died for us – and recognizing all that that means, why would we ever want to go back? The tyranny of living under the law is a place we should never want to go back to. That’s what Paul is saying here to his readers – “*Don’t go back!*”

Route 66 State Park hasn’t always been on the map of tourist stops in the St. Louis area. Years ago it was known by its former name, Times Beach. Times Beach was a town in the 1980’s bought and dismantled, the people moved away. Just a few miles west of St. Louis, right off Interstate-44, you could see deserted streets, abandoned homes, overgrown lots – a suburban ghost town. Why? Because the EPA discovered widespread dioxin contamination stemming from the oil mixture used to keep dust on the roads down. And what was the big deal about dioxin? Well, at the time, there was concern it could lead to a severe form of acne, terrible headaches, weight loss, liver and nerve damage, possibly problems with reproduction, the immune system, enzymes, and genes as well. Now the years since have seen a great deal of cleanup there and some shifting views on the actual risk dioxin poses. But not then. Back then you just wanted to get out – to get out and not go back. After all, who would want to go back?

You get the point. Look at what has happened. Consider what Christ has done for us. For you. Take it to heart. Remember where you’ve been. And don’t go back.

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