

# **DON'T TURN BACK ON YOUR DESTINY**

GALATIANS 4:8-20

**LIVING FREE IN CHRIST TAKES COURAGE AND DETERMINATION.**

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# Don't Turn Back On Your Destiny

Galatians 4:8-20

Last time we were together, we left off with Paul addressing the Gentile believers. He was encouraging them not to buy into the lie that they would have to embrace Jewish religious, cultural, and social laws in order to enjoy the full experience of being a Christian.

In today's text, Paul is going to continue to address the Gentile-Christians. However, the Jewish-Christians will also hear what Paul is saying as the letter was being read aloud. But for the most part, Paul is talking to the Gentile-Christians.

Again, we must look at what happened the day you and I gave our lives to Christ in faith. We were physically alive but spiritually dead. When we received Christ in faith, we were born again, this time spiritually. We were made spiritually alive. In addition to being spiritually dead, we were in bondage. We were slaves to sin, to Satan, and to this world. When we received Christ in faith, we were set free.

We were set free to follow Jesus and to pursue holiness. But I think that it is often easier for us to live in bondage. Oftentimes I think we would just like to be told what to do. But life in Christ is not like that. Freedom is a great privilege but it is also frightening. When God set Israel free from their slavery in Egypt, they too had trouble in dealing with their freedom. When things got a little tough, their first reaction was to want to go back to Egypt. They would almost talk as if the times they spent in Egypt were the good old days.

The Gentile-Christians had to learn that living free in Christ was a gift from God through His Son Jesus and they should embrace this gift. How committed are we to living free?

A lawyer was defending a man accused of burglary. He tried this daring defense to keep his client from going to jail.

He said, "You honor, my client merely inserted his arm into the window and removed a few trifling articles. His arm is not himself, and I fail to see how you can punish the whole individual for an offense committed by his arm."

"Well put," the judge replied. "Using your logic, I hereby sentence the defendant's arm to one year's imprisonment. He can accompany it or not, as he chooses."

The defendant smiled. With his lawyer's assistance he detached his artificial limb, laid it on the bench, and walked out a free man.

Freedom takes a great deal of commitment. The question is how dedicated are we to remaining spiritually free?

When I lead Bible studies or teach classes, I often hear people talk about how stupid or weak the Bible characters are. For example, God set the Hebrews free from a long and brutal slavery. While they were in the wilderness, food became a little scarce. Their first response to this was, "Let's kill Moses and return to Egypt. At least we had meat to eat in Egypt." Almost without exception when I teach this class, the people say, "How stupid could the Hebrews be? God just set them free, promised them a new land and a new life. And they want to go back to slavery because they are experiencing a little difficulty?"

My response is always, "You and I are neither braver, smarter, or more noble than the Hebrews or any of the Bible characters. In fact, I'm sure that without the grace of God, we all have a little bit of Judas Iscariot in us. We all have the ability to easily turn on God."

In this morning's text, we should all take a hard and humble look at our own spiritual journeys. The temptation to go back to slavery seems to be a part of our inherited sinful natures. It seems as though when things get difficult, we want to return to our old way of life. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **LIVING FREE IN CHRIST TAKES COURAGE AND DETERMINATION.** In other words, our motto should be, "We'd rather suffer and die in the wilderness with Christ, free men and women; rather than go back to the slavery of this world, no matter how comfortable we remember it to be." We are destined by God to live free. We are destined to spend eternity in heaven with Him. We are destined to be the people of God. Let us never turn back on our destinies.

When things get tough or confusing, we must concentrate on being faithful to God as described in verses 8-12. **WHEN LIFE GETS DIFFICULT, WE ARE EASILY TEMPTED TO GIVE UP OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST.** As we get into the study of this text, let me just make a couple of remarks. First of all, I really like the way the New Living Translation translates this passage. It is nicely done. Secondly, Paul has been arguing from philosophical, theological, scientific, and common sense perspectives. Today's portion of this letter is raw emotion. You get the feeling that he has exhausted all his intellect and reason. Now all that comes out is his emotion and his feelings for the church.

In verses 8-9 Paul reminds his churches that the good old days were not all that good. In the military, they had a saying, "Your best duty station was the base you just came from." In other words, soldiers tend to remember the good times they had at their last base. At their present base, they have to take orders, show up for formations, and stand inspections. Of course they had to do that at their last base, but somehow they forget that.

My dad had a horrible life in Italy. But he never forgot it. He never wanted to go back. In social gatherings, the other Italians used to talk about how beautiful and wonderful the old country was. My father always used to say, "If the old country was so good, what are we all doing here?" If we are all honest with ourselves, when we are facing difficulties, we all romanticize the past. The fact is that they were probably not as good as we remember them to be. It is just that we are discontent with the present.

Paul wants to remind these believers where they came from. They used to worship Greek and Roman gods. These gods were not gods at all. They were idols made of wood, silver, bronze, and gold. These gods had no power to do anything for them.

Think about where we all came from. We come from cultural backgrounds that may or may be consistent with Biblical teaching. Certainly if we were to look at our views of money, our views of relationships, sex, and general beliefs, we could see that many of them are not consistent with Biblical Christianity. If we were to evaluate what society at large believes, teaches, and values, we can also see how anti-Christian our society and the world we live in are. And we find ourselves facing the same kind of threat today that the Gentile-Christians were facing. The Jewish-Christians wanted to mix up pure Christianity with Judaism. Our society and oftentimes the cultures we come from have so mixed up their views and values with Christianity, that most of us believe in a blended form of Christianity that is not Christianity at all. I don't think that after spending so much time studying through the book of Amos that I need defend this point further. If you'd like, go to the church website and reread the sermons on Amos. Paul's point is that when we give our lives to Christ, we then embrace His way of life, while leaving all others behind. During your quiet times, meditate on your values and ask God to reveal to you what is authentically Christian and what is worldly. Believe me, once we blend Christianity

with our worldly backgrounds it is a real mess to unravel. Paul does not want these new Christians to be fooled into blending or mixing anything with pure Christianity.

Here is what pure Christianity is all about. Look at verse 9. He says, "But now that you know God – or rather are know by God." Think about this. Both of those phrases are true. They know God. God knows them. But the way Paul has phrased this, the second phrase is primary: both in time and in importance. Paul often talks in his letters about salvation being brought about by God's movement towards us first. It becomes complete when we respond to His approach. Jesus introduced Himself to Paul on the Road to Damascus. Paul responded in faith. Jesus chose and called the 12 Apostles. They responded in faith. Jesus portrays Himself knocking at the door of our hearts and calling out to us. We are to respond by opening the door of our hearts. For Paul, no human being searches out God before God searches them out. So for Paul, God knows us before we know Him.

Secondly, it is more important that God knows us rather than we know Him because we can do nothing to enhance God's being, but He can do everything to enhance ours. True Christianity is being in a loving and trusting relationship with God through the finished work of Jesus on the cross and the indwelling of His Holy Spirit in our lives.

But again, we seem to be more comfortable in keeping rules or doing things. Being in an intimate relationship is rewarding but it is also frightening. You see, it is much easier at the end of the day to say, "I have not stolen. I have not killed anyone. I have not committed adultery, etc."

It is much harder to say, "I loved God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind and all my strength today. And I have loved my neighbor today the same way God loves me."

Let me just put it like this. Being a good American does not make one a good Christian. Being a good Italian, Chinese, Japanese, African, or any other nationality or ethnicity does not make one a good Christian. Being a good student or having a successful career does not make one a good Christian. Only being in an intimate relationship with God through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit makes one a good Christian. Being in love is much more exciting because it is much more frightening.

Let's follow this thought up with verses 10-11 where we can see that fear tends to distort our memories. Those rules and being accepted according to all those worldly standards may now seem easy, but the truth is they were always enslaving and they will always be enslaving. I'm sure verse 10 has a lot of meaning for all of you who come from different cultures. Let me just give you a couple of quick examples that I am familiar with. The Chinese actually have calendars that mark off which days are good, which are bad, which are lucky, unlucky, etc. Before doing something like going on vacation, moving into a new house, or undertaking a particular project, they consult a calendar. If the day is a bad day, or an unlucky day, they will rearrange their whole schedule accordingly. Now let's say that you are Chinese and you become a Christian. Every day is a great day because this is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it. You are free to move, to vacation, to work, to rest, to play; basically you are free to do anything.

Now why would you ever let the markings on those calendars ever bother you again? Fear causes us to go back and enslave ourselves to these superstitions. We somehow come to believe that operating according to those days kept us safe. When in reality they kept us in bondage.

Italians tend to be very superstitious. Most people in Italy hate the church, yet they go to confession every week and go to church every Sunday and on the Holy Days. Many Italians still wear the horn in order to ward off curses.

Paul is frightened that the Gentile-Christians may start to follow Jewish religious laws out of fear and superstition. The point is that when we come to Christ, we evaluate everything in the world and culture by His standards. We do not evaluate Christ by the standards of this world.

In verse 12 we can hear Paul cry out, "Don't give up. Don't go back." In verse 11 Paul said, "I fear for you." Here in verse 12 he follows that up with, "I plead with you brothers and sisters." Now please look at verse 12 because I think this is remarkable. Paul says, "Become like me." In other places he says, "Imitate me, follow me." I'd like to just take a moment to address all people who are in any sort of leadership position in our church. Could we be as bold as Paul and say to all the people who attend Devon Church, "Follow us. Imitate us as we imitate Christ?" To me, that is quite a challenge. For everybody who attends Devon Church, please pray regularly for me, for the board, for teachers and leaders of all sorts in our church that we provide you with good examples of what it means to follow Christ and that we live out authentic Christianity. Pray that our lives provide good models of what it means to imitate Christ.

And believe me, Paul knew what it meant to give up former measures of righteousness. Paul was at the top academically, politically, socially, and religiously. Yet he gave it all up and labeled all his accomplishments as garbage. For Paul life was now only about being in and following Christ in love. I can tell you from personal experience that living free in Christ is a daily battle. Sin, sinful habits, and demonic strongholds are hard to defeat. But please don't give up. Paul warned his churches and I'm warning us not to give up because **WHEN LIFE GETS DIFFICULT, WE ARE EASILY TEMPTED TO GIVE UP OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST.**

When I played baseball, one of the most important qualities of players that I enjoyed playing with was that when things got difficult, they never turned on the other players or blamed a loss on others. I think that special teams are the ones where players stick together through the good times as well as the bad. In verses 13-16 Paul encourages his people to be faithful to the church. The tendency is this. **WHEN LIFE GETS DIFFICULT, WE ARE EASILY TEMPTED TO TURN ON OUR TEAMMATES.**

Verse 13 reminds all of us that our freedom cost somebody. The obvious starting point is that our freedom cost Jesus His life. It cost the Father the excruciating task of pouring out His wrath for us on His One and Only Beloved Son Jesus. It cost the Holy Spirit the anguish of the emotional rift in the Godhead during that time. It cost many prophets and most of the Apostles their lives to pass down the written Word of God.

The Galatians received the wonderful Gospel message ... at the expense of the Apostle Paul's health. It seems as if Paul contracted some sort of illness on the southern coastlands that forced him to go to the higher mountainous altitudes. William Ramsey felt it fit the description of malaria. If one contracted malaria, the only treatment was to go to higher altitudes. So it seems as if God had predestined the Galatians to hear the Gospel message. God got Paul to them through an illness. Here again, I have to say that many Christians have distorted the Gospel message by defining good and bad by our cultural standards. There are many churches that preach that if we follow Christ that we should be healthy and wealthy. But it seems to me that the Bible's definition of what good and bad are, what is desirable or

undesirable, are exactly opposite of what the world teaches. Paul's illness meant the salvation of many people in the region of Galatia.

And in verse 14 we can see the excitement of the freedom they found in the Gospel. This verse seems to indicate that Paul may have had more than malaria. In the first phrase he says, "Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Literally, it says that they did not spit. If someone had epilepsy or other physically debilitating symptoms, people would spit on the ground as they passed. They felt this would ward off the evil spirits and curses that affected the sick person. People have tried to identify Paul's thorn in the flesh and combine it with this illness. People have proposed that Paul had malaria, epilepsy, depression, and as we will see later, serious eye problems. At the end of this letter Paul says, "See with what large letters I am writing to you?" And we also know that Paul used an amanuensis to write his letters. Paul dictated them while the amanuenses wrote them down.

At any rate, the Galatians did not care how sick Paul was and how revolting the symptoms of his disease were. The message of being reconciled with God and knowing they could be right with God far overshadowed any of their discomfort. Don't miss how remarkable this is. We are often uncomfortable around people that are chronically sick, handicapped, or socially less fortunate than we are. We almost approach them with the same superstitions of the ancient people. Only instead of spitting on the ground, we stay away from them.

Instead, the Galatians were so excited about the Gospel message of salvation in Christ, that Paul's illnesses didn't bother them at all. In fact, they treated Paul and responded to his message as if Paul was an angel or even Christ Himself. Sometimes I know we forget how powerful the simple message of the Gospel is. In my generation, Billy Graham was a famous evangelist. If you were to ever hear one of his sermons or read one of his books, you would immediately realize two things. The first is this. They are not great works of profound intellect or rhetoric. But the second thing you realize is this. The plain simple message of the Gospel he preaches is powerful. It has had a profound effect on and continues to affect many thousands of people around the world. When Billy Graham preaches, people's lives are changed. And when you hear him preach, you would never even notice that this is not a great intellectual masterpiece. It is the power of God working through him to preach the very Good News that God loves us, wants to save us, and wants to be in a relationship with us. And this offer is for everyone who will believe.

It is relatively easy to get free in Christ. The difficulty is remaining free in Christ. In verses 15-16 we can see the challenge of freedom. Paul describes the fantastic relationship they had with him. They overlooked all his illness and deformities. They received the Gospel message with joy. In fact Paul felt so loved by them, he felt that they would even pluck out their own eyes and give them to him. That's why some people believe Paul's thorn in the flesh had something to do with eye trouble as well. At any rate, we know that Paul suffered a lot physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Yet he never let those things keep him from loving God, serving God, and bringing people the Gospel message.

But now in verse 16 Paul feels as if something has changed. His new converts were becoming confused. They were being told that in addition to confessing and following Christ, they now needed to be circumcised, learn the Jewish customs, ceremonies, and laws; and then follow them all. Because they all came from superstitious backgrounds, they became confused. And Paul has called them insane, under a spell, and out of their minds. It seems as if he is losing them. I never stop being amazed at how gullible and superstitious people are, even Christians. People

have told me The DaVinci Code proves that Jesus was married and had children. They have been confused by the Gnostic writings that have been made popular in the last couple of years. I'm surprised that nobody has approached me yet and asked me if those are really the bones of Jesus in this new absurd so-called documentary that is now parading ossuaries around claiming to contain the bones of Jesus, His wife, and children. How are Christians so easily confused?

I know that I am not the kindest or gentlest of pastors. But I think that you can count on me to tell you the truth. I know that many of you close to me have told me, "I don't sometimes like what you're telling me, ... but I do know that it is the truth. Look Paul could not change the truth. His people in Galatia whether Jewish-believers or Gentile-believers were saved the same way; by grace through faith. That message would never change. I know that people who are not following God or have become confused by the world or their culture, or their friends, do not like to hear the truth. And the funny thing is that they then alienate themselves from the very people who can tell them the truth. You can usually tell when people are doing things that they know are wrong. They stop hanging around with their Christian friends and often stop coming to church. They do this because they don't want to hear the truth. However, that is exactly the time they need to hear the truth.

**WHEN LIFE GETS DIFFICULT, WE ARE EASILY TEMPTED TO TURN ON OUR TEAMMATES.** I would encourage everyone to get into some sort of small-group accountability relationship. I know that I need people around me to tell me the truth when I get off track. And the pursuit of holiness is a lot more fun when you travel as a group. We need each other. We need our teammates. That's why Christ gave us to one another as gifts.

In verses 17-20 we see that we must always be faithful to the truth. But the temptation for us is this. **WHEN LIFE GETS DIFFICULT, WE ARE EASILY TEMPTED TO FOLLOW PEOPLE WHO SEEM TO HAVE POWER AND CONTROL.**

Keep this in mind. There are always people who claim to be religious or even Christians who operate from wrong motives as described in verses 17-18. Paul warns these new converts not to be confused by them. Legalistic people or people who sound so authoritative appeal to people who are struggling with their faith. I'm always confused how so many people can be duped by these television evangelists or faith-healers, or how so many people flock to the churches claiming to have people pull gold out of their mouths. As time goes on, most of these people are exposed for being immoral: sexually, financially, or with the abuse of power.

Please hear me out. I'm always suspicious of overly religious people. I know that sounds funny coming from a pastor, but I think it's true. Overly scrupulous people do not understand the message of Paul, Jesus, and the rest of the Bible. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ. But there will always be people who actively try to convert you to a different brand of Christianity. There are people who insist that there should be no musical instruments in church. There are churches that insist on keeping the Sabbath in a particular way or on a particular day. There are Christians who insist on telling you what you can eat, drink, etc. In fact, there are all sorts of people out there trying to take away your freedom in Christ. Their motives are self-centered motives. They are interested in getting you to follow their particular way of thinking. Please, don't be confused by people who seem to have answers to all of the questions, or perform these so-called miracles, people who rant and rave and make the gospel presentation a show.

Look at verses 19-20 where Paul describes the only legitimate, God-given, right motive for ministry, love. Paul talks as if he were a woman in labor trying to give birth to this healthy church. His only motive is that they find salvation in Christ, that

they receive God's Holy Spirit, and that they grow in their faith. He is only interested that they find Christ and don't confuse the Christ of salvation with any other perverted expression of salvation that adds self-righteousness to it.

I think that I have been true to that attitude. I am not jealous of other people's ministries. I am happy to see people saved and ministered to wherever they go. I am not possessive and have readily encouraged, and helped people to find other churches where they could be ministered to better. People who find Christ here or are ministered to here in any way, is nothing for me to pat myself on the back for. I think our attitude at Devon Church is that we exist to glorify God and participate in what He is doing in the world in any way He asks of us. We are not here to amass a huge membership list or to raise money. We are not here to become famous or powerful or influential. We are here to minister to whomever God sends here to minister. I think we have been pretty faithful to that mission throughout the years. We don't make ourselves look slick, or clever, or intelligent, or religious. We are just a bunch of Christians trying to follow Christ the best we can as individuals and as a church family. We are plain, simple people trying to grow in holiness. We are willing to have anybody join us who is also trying to grow in grace.

Let me close this section with two thoughts. Look at the first phrase in verse 19. Paul is talking as if were a woman giving birth to the same child twice. Childbirth is painful and traumatic enough. To have to go through the same agony twice to deliver once is unbelievable. And Paul ends verse 20 by saying that he is totally perplexed. He doesn't know what else he can do to keep them from giving up their authentic Christianity.

One of the hardest things for pastors and leaders to see is people turning back. We often spend a lot of time teaching, discipling, and counseling people. We put a lot of time, energy, and money into helping people get free and grow. To then watch them make poor choices and go backwards in their faith is emotionally painful. I can tell you, we go through all the stages of grief. We deny it's happening. We get angry. We bargain. But seldom are we ever fully reconciled with the fact that people insist on going back to the bondage of their old way of life. I know the leaders in this church. None of them have ulterior motives. They are not looking for your money. They do not desire power. They want nothing more than to see all of you find freedom in Christ and to grow in your faith. Our motive here is love; love for God, love for one another, and love for you. Please remember this. There is no easy way to maintain our freedom. There is no magic pill. Maintaining our freedom in Christ is difficult. Be careful to guard your heart and mind because **WHEN LIFE GETS DIFFICULT, WE ARE EASILY TEMPTED TO FOLLOW PEOPLE WHO SEEM TO HAVE POWER AND CONTROL.**

If you are a Christian, then Jesus has set us free from the bondage of sin, Satan, and death. He has set us free from all forms of religions and religious laws. We are free to now pursue a form of righteousness far above any religious laws. But remember this. **LIVING FREE IN CHRIST TAKES COURAGE AND DETERMINATION.**

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul said that we are God's masterpiece. We are precious works of art. We are continually being made into the men and women God wants us to be. It's not always easy and it is often painful. But listen to what William Barclay says about this in his commentary on the Gospel of John:

"When Jesus decided to change Peter's name in John 1:42, it demonstrated how Jesus looks at men. He does not only see what a man is; he also sees what a man can become. He sees not only the actualities in a man; he also sees the possibilities. Jesus looked at Peter and saw in him not only a Galilean fisherman but one who had

it in him to become the rock on which his church would be built. Jesus sees us not only as we are, but as we can be; and he says: 'Give your life to me, and I will make you what you have it in you to be.' Once someone came on Michelangelo chipping away with his chisel at a huge shapeless piece of rock. He asked the sculptor what he was doing. 'I am releasing the angel imprisoned in this marble,' he answered. Jesus is the One Who sees and can release the hidden hero in every man."

I don't know where you are this morning or how you feel about your freedom in Christ, but as for me, "I want to become all Christ has in mind for me to be ... and I'd rather die a free man in the wilderness than ever return to the bondage of this world, no matter how flashy or appealing it looks." How about you?