

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Finding the way back

Presented by David Kerr

Hansel and Gretel ventured in to the forest, heaving a trail of breadcrumbs – right idea, wrong marker. How often have you parked your car and not taken sufficient notice of the location and return to conduct a search that severely tested your ability to remain civilized and dignified? It becomes a little more serious, when you're in a foreign city, and can't speak the language, and only have a rough visitor's map as your sole source of help.

The stakes climb even higher when curiosity or adventure takes you off the known path, as it did with Hansel and Gretel, explore a fascinating forest that has caught your attention. You notice warning signs that former travellers have left. These veteran pilgrims, scarred but wiser, leave warning of pitfalls. Quicksand, the possibility of being captured by unseen forces and other sinister threats, mingle with the excitement of your curiosity. Today I want to talk about finding your way back after you have left the known track – breaking free from the grip of a lifestyle that has slowly sapped your vitality and ability to enjoy life.

Today I'm talking about finding your way back. As a counsellor I speak with folk who have decided to explore or experiment with lifestyles that have taken them onto an unknown path – a path that initially has the promise of excitement and interest, but has left them powerless in a lifestyle from which they can't break free.

Curiosity creates a hunger to try something different. There's nothing wrong with that. We need to have variety. However we need to take care. Our thirst can tempt us to taste what the warning signs call dangerous. A taste turns to a craving that demands an immersion into the cool sensuous water that gradually turns ugly, and become like dark quicksand. You may be an experimenter who started smoking dope and now it's impossible to finance your crack habit. You may have quietly explored porn sites on the net. The titillation at first was satisfying but now deceit has crept in. The embarrassment of your partner or family finding out is excruciating. You may have enjoyed the first long look, then the excitement of connecting with him or her – someone forbidden, who seemed to add something special to your life, but now it's a problem. You feel caught, stuck and ashamed.

What interest, curiosity or adventure has taken you off the way of contentment, joy and freedom, so that you now feel helpless and defeated? Do you want to find your way back to better times? Do you want to feel secure, content, at peace, free? Maybe you've never experienced that oasis in your life before and you say "I've got nothing to go back to, I simply want to go forward" It may not be a question of going back, but pressing on.

Jesus told the story about a young man who wanted to leave the lifestyle in which his caring parents had raised him, and explore the unknown. His forest was the so-called "good life". Now, it takes courage to leave the known way and head off into a different and unfamiliar direction. He was willing to risk it. There's something rather commendable about that. However, things aren't always as they seem.

Hansel and Gretel risked it as they walked into the exciting mysterious and dangerous depths of the forest. The young man in the story of Jesus wasn't captured by a wicked witch. His interest and curiosity led him through the gate of excitement literally into a foul bog, where he had to fight the pigs that were entrusted in his care for the scraps of their food in order to survive. Any behaviour that brings us down to that level might suggest that we are under a spell. Do you feel as though a spell has been cast over you? How do you find your way back?

Today I'm talking about finding a way back from being caught in behaviour that is self-destructive, or at the very least, self-defeating, and the desire to rediscover the security, enjoyment and freedom that once filled your life. Jesus told the story about a young man, well-loved and cared for by godly parents, who took an advance on his inheritance and explored the "other side" of life, only to find that the promise of greater excitement developed a lifestyle that placed him penniless in the same bog as the pigs that he fed. Have you wandered into patterns of living that may be self-defeating, addictive and even self-destructive? How do you find your way?

Firstly, there is a way back. No matter how passionately you have plunged into a lifestyle that has been physically, emotionally and spiritually harmful, there is a way back. There will be scars that will show the territory you've covered, but your condition can only improve.

Secondly, the way back calls for a decision. The young man in the story would have enjoyed his riotous lifestyle until it reached a particular point. That critical point is when the cost and pain of the lifestyle outweighed the enjoyment and benefits. It's strangely true that even the most desperate drug addict who seeks to be clean, is prepared to endure a nightmare existence, because the enjoyment and benefits of the drugs still tip the scales against the pain of recovery and rehabilitation. No matter what restrict and self-defeating lifestyle you have chosen to develop, if the benefits are larger than the cost of recovery and healing, you will choose to stay comfortable in your pathology.

The young man, or the prodigal son, came to that place. The Bible says he came to "himself". He confronted himself in a moment of raw honesty. He acknowledged that he needed help. This is the turning point for anyone who wants to change direction. The open and frank recognition that they need to change and cannot do it by themselves. The prodigal son could see the home of his youth, his parents, all that was good and healthy. He saw how far he had wandered off the track. He longed for the security, warmth, care and support of home. He put his lifestyle on the scales and made a solid decision to go home.

Are you comfortably uncomfortable in your lifestyle? Do you long for satisfaction, contentment and joy, but feel caught up on a meaningless treadmill? Are you ready to make a decision? If not, when do you think you'll be ready to decide? Are you aware of what you need to help you make a decision? If nothing changes in the year, where do you think you'll be at the end of that time? What level of pain do you need to experience that will force you to make a decision?

I've been considering the question of finding the way back. Some of the best children's fairytales paint the dark forest as a place of excitement, but also with more than a hint of darkness and danger. So it is true in real life. The temptation to leave the secure way is ever present, in spite of the warnings of the wise, and consequently, dreams become nightmares. As a result you can become stuck and eventually give up. Firstly, you need to know there IS a way! Secondly, the way back also requires a decision. The prodigal son weighed up his lifestyle and chose to find a way back home to his father, turning away from a pursuit that was once attractive, but had finally brought him down.

One of the great promises of the Bible is that no matter what lifestyle you have explored and experimented with, whatever the circumstances that have overtaken you, if you feel as though you're in no-man's-land, chained to a life that's lost its meaning and purpose, desperately pounding away on a treadmill – going nowhere – there is a way back. God is waiting, just like the father of the Bible story. The invitation is clear. “come to me, all who are weighed down, and I will give you rest” said Jesus .

John - well, that's the name I'll give him – sat quietly in the counselling room. His head buried in his hands. He was a successful businessman. His possessions were considerable, but over a long period of time, in the search for more excitement and stimulation, explored the seedy side of night life and dangerous relationships that took him slowly into a lifestyle that deprived his wife and family of his time and energy. After three years and a collection of affairs, mounting credit card debt, poor health due to his overeating and drinking, John longed for the freedom and happiness he enjoyed earlier in his married life. Finally, John made a decision.

He wanted to find his way back but had lost the markers. Over time, with the help of counselling, he painfully broke off the relationship with his current mistress, renegotiated his loan to extinguish his credit card debt, commenced an exercise program and is working at reconnecting with his very patient and forgiving wife. John has also found his way back into a local church, where he has experienced support and acceptance. He is learning what it's like to experience contentment and peace, and finding purpose again in his life.

Your story may be very different from John's but the experience of feeling lost and lacking purpose is just as empty and as frustrating. Do you want to find your way back? Are you ready to make that decision? If you want to find your way back, which is also the forward, walk in the shoes of the prodigal son. God is the ever-waiting, patient Father, loving and forgiving. You may need the support of a professional counsellor to clarify your thinking and to support you.

The Christian message is one of hope. Consistently, through the Bible, God indicates His desire to give those who love Him a bright future. I love these verses from Jeremiah 29:

I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for. Then you will call to me. You will come and pray to me, and I will answer you. You will seek me, and you will find me because you seek me with all your heart.

For those who put their trust in our loving God, the long term will bring security, peace and joy. The anxiety, disappointment and terror of our present lives will pass away.