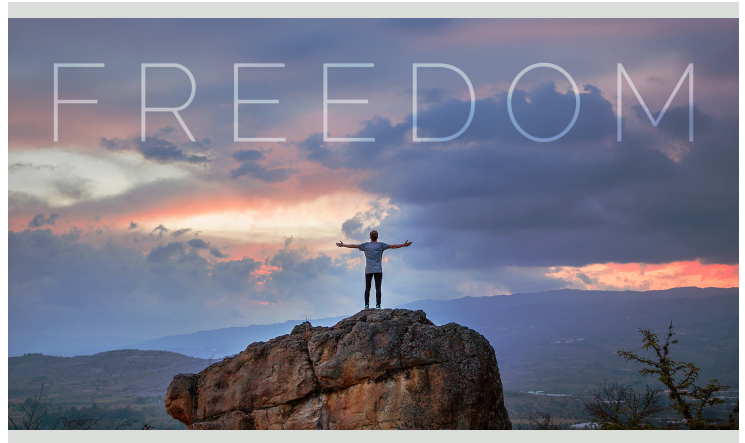


Digging Deeper

August 23, 2026



What has happened to all your joy?

Study Scripture Online

Did you know there is no such thing as a joyful legalist? Think about it for a moment. I'll bet you can't think of a single person who is both a committed legalist and a joyful person. And I'm positive you can't name a legalistic church that is known for its joy. I don't mean a legalist can't laugh, or that he has no happiness in his life. He can talk about joy. He can claim joy. He can act like he has joy. But he cannot be joyful, for joy and legalism are absolutely incompatible.

Nor can a legalistic church be joyful. One thing you'll never hear from someone who attends a legalistic church is, "Sunday is the high point of my week. I can't wait to go to church." Oh, he may say, "I never miss church." He may say with considerable conviction, "We teach sound doctrine in our church." He may even say, "You should come to my church." But he will never say, "I love church." At least he will not say it and mean it.

The Apostle Paul addresses this issue in Galatians 4:12-20, as we continue our exciting journey through this powerful epistle from the New Testament. It's been some time since we reviewed the context of this letter, so let me take a few moments to do that this morning.

Galatia was an area of central Turkey where the Apostle Paul shared the Gospel on the first of three missionary journeys. He preached the Gospel there and organized converts into churches. But since his primary calling was to be an evangelist, he didn't stay to pastor those churches. Rather he appointed the more mature of his converts to be elders and pastors over the others. Then he moved on to other areas to expose them to the Gospel.

When he returned to Palestine after his first mission, Paul heard through the grapevine that the churches he had planted in Galatia were being influenced by false teachers, so he fired off this letter to call his converts back to the truth. These false teachers we call Judaizers because they were essentially trying to turn Christianity into a new and improved form of Judaism. It is true that Christianity has its roots in Judaism, but we must never forget that it is radically different. Judaism requires obedience to the Law of

Moses; Biblical Christianity does not. Judaism requires rituals like circumcision and observance of special diets; Biblical Christianity does not. Judaism has an ecclesiastical calendar that must be followed; Biblical Christianity does not. Most importantly, Judaism in the first century taught that salvation is a cooperative effort between man and God. Biblical Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that salvation is God's work.

The term we use for the error of these Judaizers is legalism. But legalism is not some dry and dusty ancient heresy; it is still alive and well in the church today. It takes different forms; it focuses on different issues; but fundamentally it always makes the same mistake-teaching that man and God are partners in the salvation business. God does His part and we do our part. Together we get the job done.

No, says Paul, all we bring to the table is the sin from which we are redeemed. Yes, we must believe, but faith itself is not a meritorious work; it is essentially just casting ourselves on the grace and mercy of God. We are saved by believing, not by achieving.

Since I am using this term legalism a lot, let me define it for you once more: "Legalism is a wrong attitude toward the code of laws under which one lives, or which one imposes on others." Notice it is not the observance of rules or standards, nor even the imposition of the same on others. All of us are subject to certain rules and most of us impose rules on others-on our children or employees, for example. The presence of rules does not in itself constitute legalism. Rather legalism is a wrong attitude toward the rules-an attitude that exalts self and judges others, an attitude that bases acceptance upon obedience or performance, an attitude that proliferates rules rather than teaching discernment.

Now through the middle of chapter 4 of Galatians, the Apostle Paul has been arguing vigorously against the legalists of Galatia by marshaling all the biblical and theological arguments at his disposal. He has done an incredible job, and I would say the case is water-tight. But now, in our text for today, he takes off his theologian's hat and as a pastor he appeals to their hearts. Follow with me in your Bible as I read from Galatians 4:12-20:

I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong. {13} As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. {14} Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. {15} What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. {16} Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

{17} Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them. {18} It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you. {19} My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, {20} how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!

Clearly Paul is appealing here, not so much to reason or theology as to their emotions and their sense of right and wrong. He asks his converts, in effect, "What happened between you and me in the time since I led you to Christ? You were my best friends and

now you treat me as an enemy. You accepted the truth but now you're flirting with heresy. I went through labor to help you experience the new birth, and now I find myself in labor all over again trying to extricate you from the clutches of these false teachers."

The issue Paul raises that I want us to focus on primarily is the question in verse 15: "What has happened to all your joy?" That is a very serious question for any believer to think about. If you once had joy and lost it, it's time to ask, "What happened to it?" God didn't take it away. Age doesn't deplete it. Circumstances don't destroy it. But wrong beliefs do. False ways of thinking had come along and robbed the Galatian believers of the joy they once had.

Now let me start our thinking process this morning with this concept:

Joy is the fruit of the Spirit, and God intended for every believer to be full of joy.

On the very next page of your Bible, in Galatians 5:22 we read these familiar words: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." I understand this verse to mean that when the Holy Spirit is allowed to control a person's life, all these qualities, including joy, will be evident. By the same token, if the Spirit is not in control, joy will be absent. Of course, all of these qualities have their counterfeits that anyone can experience—even those not controlled by the Holy Spirit. Love's counterfeit is possessiveness or even lust. Peace's counterfeit might be isolation. And joy's counterfeit is happiness or euphoria.

Happiness, if you think about it, is directly related to the circumstances of life. When things go well, we're happy. When things do not go well, we're not happy. It is as simple as that. No one is happy with poverty or rejection or illness or loneliness, and most of us experience such things from time to time. Pleasant times are usually seasonal and transitory, sometimes even totally elusive. If we equate happiness with joy, then we will perceive of the joy of the Lord in the same way. Sometimes we have it; sometimes we don't.

That isn't what Jesus had in mind when he prayed regarding His disciples in John 17:13: "I am on my way to you now, Father, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that my disciples may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world."

Obviously joy and happiness are not the same, for in the same breath He prays for the full measure of joy for His disciples and acknowledges that the world hates them. Being hated and happy at the same time are hardly compatible notions. Joy must be something different. Perhaps one of the keys to understanding it is in the little word "my" in Jesus' prayer. He prayed that they might have "the full measure of my joy within them." The joy He wants us to have is His own joy, the kind He experienced when He was upon the earth.

What was that like? Fortunately, we are not left to guess concerning the nature of His joy, for in Hebrews 12:2 we read, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat

down at the right hand of the throne of God.” The joy Jesus experienced was something set before Him by the Father. It was a prize promised at the end of the road—so desirable that it enabled him to endure all sorts of difficulty, pain, and even shame in order to reach it.

You’ve heard of the term “delayed gratification” as opposed to “instant gratification.” Delayed gratification is not a popular concept today. Children generally don’t have the foggiest notion of what it means; teens understand it but hate it; and many adults pay it lip service only. Delayed gratification is waiting to purchase something until you need it or can afford it, rather than borrowing to get it, believing that greater gratification will result from waiting. It is waiting to enjoy the pleasures of intimacy until marriage, believing that greater gratification will result from waiting. Delayed gratification is accepting delays in getting what we want in the belief that getting it in God’s time will make it all the better.

That’s what Jesus did. He endured the cross, despising the shame, knowing that joy and glory were awaiting Him. He could have called 10,000 angels to rescue Him from His enemies, but He knew the cross had to precede the crown. It was the end result, the goal, and the finish line that kept Him focused. Serious athletes understand this principle. Olympic runners, for instance, will subject themselves to rigorous workouts, painful experiences, and severe deprivations in order to do their very best in the Olympic Games. They are not masochists who simply enjoy pain. They are driven by a vision of the glory awaiting them if they win the race and receive a medal. There are no shortcuts, and the process becomes endurable because it contributes to the joy of winning.

That, friends, is the essence of the joy of the Lord. It is a wonderful sense of privilege and an incredible sense of destiny as we participate in the grand work of Christ upon the earth. It is the expectation that the result of all our service, trials, and suffering in the cause of Christ will be a magnificent sharing with Him in His kingdom. We will reign with Him (2 Tim. 2:12), we will sit with Him on His throne (Rev. 3:21), and we will share with Him in His glory (1 Peter 5:1). Can anything beat that? Paul put it this way in Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” And Peter said the same thing in 1 Peter 4:12-13: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

Now, can you begin to see why legalists don’t have joy? Legalism by its very nature is focused on the journey, not the destination. If I may try to paint a word picture, the legalist is so concerned about the schedule, and whether he has the right directions, whether the gas tank is full, whether the suitcase contains everything needed for the trip, and whether he has confirmed reservations at a motel for each night along the way. He’s constantly complaining about the other drivers on the road who are speeding (more than he is), he has no freedom, no sense of adventure, no ability to stop along the way to smell the flowers or change the itinerary. The grace-oriented person, on the other hand, focuses on the destination and that makes joy possible. Joy, friends, is the fruit of the Spirit, and God intended for every believer to be full of it.

Now half my time is up and I'm still on the first point. But relax, that was intentional. We will move quickly through the other points. The experience of the Galatian believers coincides with what most of us know to be true, namely . . .

When believers are first freed from slavery, they inevitably experience joy and the godly qualities that accompany joy.

There's nothing like the joy of first realizing one's sins are forgiven. I've witnessed many people come to faith in Christ, and there's just nothing like seeing the light go on and watching the new convert absolutely revel in his or her new-found freedom. Paul hints that the Galatian believers experienced that joy when he first shared the Gospel with them. That's inherent in the question he asks in verse 15, "What has happened to all your joy?" But he also talks of other qualities that accompanied their joy.

Kindness to the messenger. In verse 12 he affirms that "You have done me no wrong." He's referring, of course, to the many months he spent ministering to them. They had met his needs, they had received his message, and they had obeyed his Gospel. They had not wronged him in any way. His ultimate point, of course, is to draw a contrast between their former behavior and their present attitude. But the fact is, it is not unusual for new converts to treat the one who led them to Christ this way.

By the way, what's particularly special about the kindness Paul received from the Galatians when he first took the Gospel to them is that he hadn't even planned to go there. When he set his itinerary for the first missionary journey, it didn't include Galatia. He says in verse 13, "As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you." Scholars have suggested that Paul was possibly an epileptic and that the higher, dryer climate of North Galatia was better for his epilepsy than the humid coastal plain he had been working in. Others think he may have caught malaria in the lowlands and traveled north to recuperate.

At any rate he states in verse 14, "Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn." Paul was not a beautiful physical specimen. There are a number of comments in his letters which indicate that he was probably a short, ugly, half-blind Jew with an illness that made him socially repulsive. But they were so overjoyed to hear the good news of salvation that they were willing to overlook all those things. They were kind to the messenger. Second, he mentions . . .

Gratitude for the message. In verse 14 he continues, "You welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself." I've never had anyone mistake me for an angel, but I have had people whom I have led to Christ express their gratitude in ways that were almost embarrassing. One dear Japanese lady whom God allowed me to lead to faith nearly 30 years ago still calls me her "divine shepherd." I assure you I am not divine, but I know what she is expressing-thanks to God that He used someone to help remove the scales from her eyes and to experience the joy of knowing Christ. Many of you have had the same delight in leading someone to salvation and have experienced the same gratitude.

Another quality that frequently accompanies joy is . . .

Generosity and personal sacrifice. Paul writes in verse 15, "I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me." Actually, there may be more here than meets the eye (if you'll pardon the pun). There is considerable evidence that the Apostle Paul suffered from severe eye trouble, perhaps a result of the blinding light he saw during his Damascus Road experience. One of the hints comes from the last chapter of Galatians, where in 6:11 he writes, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." Normally he wrote his letters by dictation to a secretary. But when possible he would write the final paragraph by himself, although he was forced to write large. If indeed Paul did have an eye disease, his assertion that the Galatians would have plucked out their eyes and given them to him, if possible, demonstrates how much they appreciated him and his ministry. Their joy led them to a spirit of generosity and great sacrifice.

Friends, a joyful believer is a kind believer, full of gratitude, and generous. I must say that I see all three of these characteristics to a large extent here at First Free. Random acts of kindness are frequent, gratitude for the message is evident, and your generosity is legendary. This to me is an indication of a high degree of Christian joy.

But while joy, kindness, gratitude and generosity are common characteristics in those who have been newly freed from slavery, the remainder of this passage indicates that something had gone terribly wrong.

Joy disappears when legalism gets a grip on a believer's life.

"What has happened to all your joy?", Paul asks. And he follows that up by revealing two symptoms often seen in the one who toys with legalism.

He begins to view truth-tellers as enemies. Verse 16: "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" I once worked for a committed legalist. I was teaching in a Bible College, and I was teaching grace, as best I understood it nearly 30 years ago. I was teaching some really radical ideas, like the fact that God loves everyone, even charismatics; and that Jesus turned water into wine at Cana of Galilee-real wine; and that believers just might have to go through the Tribulation. It wasn't long before I came to be viewed as a dangerous enemy by the President of the college, and he devoted himself to getting rid of me and my kind. We were corrupting impressionable, young minds and challenging them to think through their faith instead of just buying the legalistic party line. Well, I saved him the trouble and resigned, along with the entire Bible and theology faculty.

If you live, practice, and preach grace you will elicit one of two reactions: people will love you or they will hate you. They will either revel in the freedom you are offering them or they will consider that freedom a tremendous threat.

A second symptom of the one who toys with legalism is that . . .

He becomes vulnerable to manipulative false teachers. I paraphrase Paul's warning to the Galatian believers about the Judaizers in verse 17: "These heretics go to great lengths to flatter you, but their motives are rotten; it is for their good, not yours. They want to shut you out of the free world of God's grace so that you will always depend on them for approval and direction, making them feel important." Legalists are very

susceptible to control by manipulative teachers. Why? Because legalism is all about control and security. The legalist is uncomfortable with loose ends; therefore he gravitates to teachers who are dogmatic, and for whom all the issues are black and white.

A lot of funny things are going on in the church today. Religious leaders with great charisma are accruing to themselves followers with unswerving loyalty. Sometimes they make up for poor scholarship and lack of reason with greater zeal. They remind me of the preacher who wrote in the margin of his sermon notes, "Weak point, pound pulpit here."

Zeal or enthusiasm, you know, is not all bad. It's good to be enthusiastic about one's beliefs, provided those beliefs are true. We need to heed the warning Paul gave to the young pastor Timothy in 2 Tim 4:2-3: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."

Well, we started today by observing that joy is the fruit of the Spirit, and God intended for every believer to be full of joy. Then we noted that in Galatia, as everywhere, when believers are first freed from slavery, they do indeed experience joy and the other godly qualities that inevitably accompany it. Thirdly, the Galatians also demonstrated another universal truth: joy disappears when legalism gets a grip on a believer's life.

What's the solution? What is Paul's answer to this tragic turnabout he sees among his converts?

The treatment prescribed is a strong dose of uncompromising truth and unconditional love.

The Galatians were like so many whose enthusiasm for a Bible teacher wanes as soon as he delves into a subject that offends or convicts them. They tend to be selective in their acceptance of truth. But the truth is the truth, and if the truth produces conflict, so be it. The world tells us the way to resolve conflict is to compromise, and indeed sometimes it is, but never in respect to essentials of the faith. Though Paul desperately wants to see his former relationship with the Galatians restored, he is not about to compromise his convictions to achieve it. He's not about to say, "Oh, this isn't such a big deal after all; just don't let your legalism get out of hand." That would be to compromise the Gospel and to admit he was wrong in teaching in the first place that grace is the only way to God.

The mark of a real friend is that he tells those he loves the truth, even though it may cost him. Lincoln said to one of his friends before delivering a controversial address, "If it is decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked to the truth." That would sound pretty shocking coming from one of the candidates for the Presidency today, wouldn't it? But that's how God wants us to respond when the truth is at stake.

The only restriction God has placed upon the speaking of the truth is that it must be spoken in love. Uncompromising truth must be accompanied by unconditional love. He

says in verse 19, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!"

People need to know they are loved; they need to be encouraged; they need to be affirmed. A pastor must be a shepherd as well as a teacher. The Apostle places infinite value upon the Galatians, just as a mother does upon her children. Indeed, Paul was their spiritual parent. He was the one who labored to bring them the knowledge of Christ, which eventually resulted in a new birth for them. But a miscarriage had occurred along the way, and now he is in labor all over again "until Christ is formed in you," or, as one paraphrase expresses it, "until you take the shape of Christ."

Let me say a summary word about a congregation's attitude to their pastor and vice versa. We should take a cue from this passage that we are not to judge our spiritual leaders by outward appearance. They may be fit as a fiddle or sickly, intelligent or average, eloquent or dull, handsome or homely, extroverted or introverted, they may be well-dressed or not. These are not the really important things. We should neither flatter them because they are unusually gifted or despise them if they are not. We should not assess their worth according to our favorite teachings. Our attitude toward spiritual leaders should be determined preeminently by their fidelity to the letter and spirit of God's Word and their desire to bring believers to maturity in Christ.

And what about the pastor's attitude to the people? John Calvin wrote, "If ministers wish to do any good, let them labor to form Christ, not to form themselves, in their hearers." Only when pastor and people thus keep their eyes on Christ will the work of Christ's church succeed.

Conclusion

I return where I started. What has happened to all your joy? If you have allowed legalism to get a foothold in your life, I know where your joy has gone—it's gone south. But if you rid yourselves of legalistic attitudes, if you accept and revel in your freedom in Christ, if you begin to view obedience as a privilege rather as a burdensome obligation, then the joy can return, and it will return. Father, Jesus prayed to you that we may have the full measure of his joy within us. We desire that for our own lives, and we desire it for our church. Renew your joy in us. Amen!