

“What Has Happened to All Your Joy?”

Text: Galatians 4:8-20

Whenver legalism rears its ugly head, slavery to the “basic principles of the world” is not far behind. Once enslaved to the basic principles of the world, the joy of the knowing that Christ has died for the forgiveness of all our sins and that our Lord fulfilled the law for us so that we can be justified, inevitably disappears. Ask a slave if there is joy in slavery.

As we have seen, Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia is his response to an attempt by a group of Jewish converts to Christianity to infiltrate these churches that the apostle had helped to found, with the express intention of undermining the gospel that Paul had previously taught them. Preaching what Paul calls a false gospel, these false teachers—known as the Judaizers—were deceptively arguing that Paul’s gospel of free grace inevitably leads to license. They had secretly worked their way into the Galatian churches and were spying on those exercising their liberty in Christ, arguing that Paul’s gospel is dangerous because it supposedly encourages people to live their lives in utter disregard to the law of Moses and the traditions of the fathers of Israel. With this attack upon the gospel in Galatia, we see a clear example of the collision between a false gospel based upon human merit and obedience to the law of Moses and the gospel of Jesus Christ anchored in the free and sovereign grace of God, made manifest in the life and death of our Lord.

From the apostle Paul’s perspective, this is a battle about the fundamental nature of Christianity itself, a battle which determines whether or not Christianity is centered in the redemptive work of Christ, or in human merit, as in all the other religions of the world. Paul has just pointed out that through faith in Jesus Christ, even Gentiles become heirs to all the promises that God made to Abraham. It is through faith in Christ that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and are justified. None of these blessings come to us through good works. In Christ, all racial and social distinctions specifically related to our standing before God are removed (cf. 3:28). For in Christ, there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free. Through faith in the Savior, all of these disparate groups are now one.

Baptism, which is the sign and seal of this amazing unity, is the means by which the believer “puts on Christ.” Once clothed in the robe of Christ’s glorious and perfect righteousness, the believer—who was formerly estranged, an alien and foreigner to the things of God—is now regarded as an adopted son or daughter and entitled to the full inheritance from his heavenly father. As such, all believers, whether they be Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, have the privilege of intimate fellowship with God, just as the true Son of God, Jesus Christ did. For as God’s adopted children, we too, cry out “Abba, Father.”

Beginning in Galatians 4:8, Paul describes some of the continuing effects of the efforts of the Judaizers to infiltrate the Galatian Churches.

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. 9 But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? 10 You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! 11 I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

In this section of Galatians, Paul deals with the question of what happens when full-grown and mature sons and daughters of God seek to return to the “basic principles of the world” as the means of receiving their inheritance from their Father. Rejecting God’s way and returning to the former way of seeking to establish their own righteousness, they now attempt to gain the inheritance through human merit and external ceremonies instead of through the saving work of Jesus Christ. They have turned their back on the truth.

Indeed, what happens when so-called Christians seek to turn back the clock of redemptive history? Should we go looking for our inheritance in the endless wilderness of the Sinai? Should we seek good things from the slave-masters who ruled over God’s people during their bondage in Egypt? Should we seek good things from those who hauled us off and held us captive in Babylon?

To make his point, Paul exhorts the Galatians to recall their own particular situation before their collective conversion to Christ. What spiritual condition were they in before the gospel came to Galatia? According to Paul, they did not know God and, therefore, they were enslaved to what Paul calls “beings,” which by nature, were not “gods” at all. The idea of being enslaved to pagan religion and idols is a theme which reappears later in Paul’s first Corinthian letter. In 1 Corinthians 8:5, Paul states “*for even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many `gods’ and many `lords’) yet for us there is but one God.*”

The implication of the apostle’s argument here is that before conversion, the Galatians had served what they thought were “gods,” but which were in reality nothing but mere idols, lifeless statues and figments of the wicked human imagination. When they had previously embraced these so-called “basic principles of the world,” the Galatians had been seeking to reject the light of natural revelation and were, as Paul says in Romans 1, guilty of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. They had exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and were serving created things rather than the creator. God would be perfectly just if he simply gave them over to their own depravity. But in his grace, God did not “give them over,” to sin and depravity. Instead God sent Paul to preach Christ to them. And now, they want to go back to these same principles?

But since the gospel of Jesus Christ had *been* preached to them—Paul publicly placarded Christ before their very eyes—the situation has radically changed. Paul tells us that the Galatians *do* know God, or rather are known by God. The idea of being known by God is a frequent theme throughout Paul’s letters—clearly implying an election unto grace and effectual calling, wherein God calls elect sinners to faith in Christ when they had been formerly dead in sins and transgressions (cf. Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:1-10).

Paul repeatedly makes this point throughout Galatians. In Galatians 1:6, Paul speaks of God as the “one who called you.” In Galatians 1:15 we learn that “God had called Paul from before his birth.” In Galatians 5:8, Paul again speaks of “the one who calls you.” And in Galatians 5:13, Paul points out that “we were called [for the purpose of being] free.” In his grace and according to his purpose, God had called the Galatians to faith in Christ through the gospel of Christ crucified when Paul had proclaimed it to them. But now the Judaizers were seeking to lure people away from Christ and turn them back to the “basic principles of the world” which had formerly enslaved them. The Judaizers were trying to convince freed slaves that slavery was really better than the freedom they now enjoyed!

How can those who know the true God—the creator and sustainer of all things—and who have been called by God through the proclamation of his Son, now turn back to the *stoicheia*, the basic principles of

the world, things which Paul calls “the weak and miserable principles” of works-righteousness? And once returning to the *stoicheia*, the Galatians will wake up and find themselves enslaved by sin and the law all over again? How can a free man desire to become a slave again? The only way this can happen is through deception as the Judaizers were doing in Galatia. In fact, the situation is now so serious that Paul will speak in this letter of the frightening situation in which certain Galatians who had been taken in by these false teachers actually risk “falling from grace”—a point Paul will make in Galatians 5:4.

The proof that “the basic principles of the world” was a reference to works-righteousness, is the fact that once the Galatians had returned to the “basic principles,” immediately, legalism reared its ugly head. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that these false teachers were demanding that their converts observe special feast days and dietary laws in addition to submitting to circumcision as a means of obtaining or perhaps maintaining a justified standing before God. The Judaizers continued to devote themselves to the Jewish religious calendar and were insisting that Gentiles do the same. As one commentator points out, Paul’s references to “years,” “months,” and “days,” bears this out:

[The] “special days” are the Sabbath (cf. Col. 2:16) and other religious fast or feast days, “months” are new moon observances (cf. Num. 28:11-15), “seasons” are feasts or festival seasons lasting more than one day (cf. Lev. 23) and “years” are Sabbatical or Jubilee years or, more probably New Year celebrations....In this [manner of reckoning] Paul apparently intends to say that the Galatians had taken over the entire Jewish system of religious observances. In his view this religious observance of sacred days and seasons according to the Jewish calendar—as an obligation imposed by the law, and not simply as a matter of custom—was a form of subservience to the *stoicheia* which could neither save nor justify its adherents but only cast them into bondage.¹

The fact that the Galatians had adopted such legalistic practices clearly marked a return to slavery and was the cause for Paul’s great concern for their eternal well-being. Indeed, Paul laments, “*I fear for you, have I wasted my efforts?*” Paul knows many of these people quite well. These are people that he obviously cares for deeply. He has preached the gospel to them and many of them came to Christ under his ministry. The apostle fears for the state of their souls and worries about their eternal destinies. This is why his warning is so pointed. Paul loves these people and cares deeply for them—this is why he speaks the truth in love.

Paul now pleads with the Galatians, and this section of his letter now takes a much more personal tone. Paul reminds the Galatians of what had transpired when he had been with them previously and how their attitude toward him has apparently changed (vv. 12-20).

12 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

¹ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 193.

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!

As he makes this impassioned personal appeal to the Galatians, Paul reminds them that he himself had previously exchanged his own rigid adherence to the law for faith in Christ, in effect, becoming a Gentile sinner as the Galatians were (cf. Galatians 2:15). Now, Paul pleads with the Galatians to live as he is living, free from bondage to the basic principles and the law (Galatians 5:1) in the liberty purchased for him by Christ. The issue seems to be that word of a series of personal attacks upon Paul had gotten back to him.

Previously, the Galatians had welcomed him into their midst. Now things were different. There is really no telling what the Judaizers had been saying about Paul to their converts. The easiest way to undermine Paul's gospel was to attack Paul personally. It appears as those who were so zealous for the law that they hate the gospel, simply ignore what the law says about bearing false witness.

Paul now reminds his readers that it was because of an illness he had previously suffered that God had providentially brought the gospel to the Galatians. It is only implied here, but the idea is that Paul was on his way somewhere else when he took ill, and was forced to stop in Galatia to recover. While here in the region recuperating, Paul had used the opportunity provided by his illness to preach the gospel to them. What from our perspective appears to be a calamity—a serious illness—God, in his gracious providence, uses to further his eternal purposes. In this case, because of Paul's illness, the gospel was preached to a group who were formerly in darkness, and through this gospel the Galatians had been set free from their bondage to sin.

There is a long history of debate among Paul's interpreters about the exact nature of his illness. The illness was, apparently, quite severe, since Paul refers to the illness as a "trial for you,"—that is, a trial for the Galatians who took care of him while he was sick. But in great kindness to him, the Galatian Christians did not treat Paul with scorn, instead they nursed him back to health. The seriousness of Paul's illness is also indicated in verse 14, when Paul speaks of being a burden to the Galatians. This illness may have had some effect upon his eyes and his vision since Paul says in verse 15 that "*if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me,*" the implication is that Paul was having difficulty with his vision. In fact, at the end of the letter, Paul makes the comment, "*See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand.*" Again, the implication being that Paul's eyesight was still affected when he wrote this epistle some months after leaving the region.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7 ff. Paul speaks of a "*thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan,*" to torment him. On three occasions Paul pled with the Lord to remove it. But God responded, "*my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.*" Whether or not this is connected with the illnesses that caused Paul to stay with the Galatians is not known. But in his gracious providence, God can turn calamity into good, and in this case, God used Paul's illness as the means to bring the gospel to Galatia.

In verses 15 and 16, Paul reminds the Galatians that their attitude toward him has changed since he had been with them. He asks the Galatians, "*What happened to your joy?*" When Paul had been with them, the Galatians, apparently, experienced the joy of the knowledge that their sins had been forgiven by the death of Christ, and that God now regarded them as righteous, because Christ's righteousness had been reckoned to them through faith, and not through works. The Galatians possessed the hope of heaven, as Jesus Christ was their only comfort in life and in death. "*What happened to your joy?*" Paul asks. Since

the Judaizers had wormed their way into the Galatian churches, the joy of the forgiveness of sin had given way to the despair and hopelessness of legalism. Those enslaved to the “basic principles,” and legalism cannot know the joy of a right-standing before God, since you never know where you stand with God, as right-standing is no longer based upon the merits of Christ, but upon the impossibility of perfect obedience to the law of God.

Paul also asks them, “*have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?*” It is one of the most important but unfortunate facts of life that the truth will cause division and make people who reject it uncomfortable. Paul had taught these Christians the true gospel of Christ crucified, and then they allowed themselves to be bewitched by the Judaizers and had embraced both the false gospel and those who taught it. Now, in contrast to the way they had received the gospel from Paul when he first preached it to them, the Galatians had become uncomfortable with the truth, since the truth will force them to admit they are wrong and if they accept Paul’s gospel they will be forced to remove the Judaizers from among their midst. Since Paul was confronting them with this truth, apparently, some of them who were formerly close to Paul, now regarded him as an enemy. From Paul’s perspective this is heart-breaking.

Paul now exposes the Judaizers’s true intentions in verse 17: “*these 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.*” Paul echoes much the same sentiment in Galatians 6:12, when he mentions that the Galatians were afraid of standing up for the truth—they were afraid of being persecuted because of the true gospel. The gospel was a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek. Hence, the “basic principles of the world,” was a message that was more readily accepted by “seekers”—a point which will come up later when Paul mentions that the Judaizer’s great boast was the large number of converts they had made.

T rue to form, the Judaizers, who could not refute Paul’s gospel—instead, tried to drive a wedge between Paul and the Galatians by destroying Paul’s credibility and enhancing their own. Paul speaks of the great zeal of the Judaizers and the fact that they want those who they have bewitched to be equally zealous for their cause. The problem is not with zeal itself, “*provided the purpose was good.*” But what was the purpose of Judaizers? It was clearly to attack the biblical gospel. In Romans 12:2, Paul exhorts Christians to base their zeal upon knowledge, but in this case, the zeal of the Judaizers was based upon spreading a false gospel. The fact that deception was also involved is clear when Paul introduces the subject of hypocrisy—Paul exhorts the Galatians to act the same way when he is with them and when he is away. Paul has little patience with hypocrisy but he has even less with zeal for a false gospel.

But it is important to remember that even though Paul is furious with the Judaizers and has lambasted the Galatians for tolerating their deception and acting hypocritically themselves, he nevertheless demonstrates his strong affection for them, still speaking of them as “*my children.*” Paul was, after all, the one who had first preached the gospel to them and in a real sense he is their spiritual father. Here he speaks of the situation in terms which are difficult to understand. He describes his pain and his anguish over the Galatians in terms of the pain of childbirth as “Christ is formed in them.” The language here is difficult and one writer’s comments provide some helpful background.

Faced now with the Galatians’ defection from the true gospel to the counterfeit offered by the heretics, Paul experiences “over gain” the pangs of labor—the sharp pains including those of perplexity (v. 20b), apprehension (v. 11), indignation (cf. 2 Cor. 11:29), and all the painful efforts required to reclaim the Galatians for the truth. “Until you take the shape of Christ” states the time when Paul’s labor pangs will cease *and* the purpose for which he is enduring them. In

the original [language], the thought is more strikingly expressed as “until Christ is formed in you.” The verb used (*morphousthai*) refers to the process whereby the fetus develops into an infant; Paul’s desire is to see Christ thus “formed” in his converts.²

This idea of “forming Christ” in them as a fetus is formed in a mother’s womb, is in many ways very similar to Paul’s statement in Colossians 3:10, where he writes that “*we are to put on the new self, which is being renewed in the image (eikon) of its creator*” and in Ephesians 4:24 where he writes, “*put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*” Thus when Paul is speaking of Christ being formed in them, he is speaking in terms of sanctification and the “new man,” as the Galatians are slowly being “morphed,” into Christ, as they are freed from obedience to the law as the basis for their right standing before God, and slavery to the basic principles as a way of life.

As a faithful shepherd, Paul laments to his spiritual children, “*I am perplexed about you!*” How could the Galatians exchange their glorious inheritance in Christ for slavery to law and bondage to the “basic principles,” which they supposedly rejected when they came to faith? Paul wishes that he could be with the Galatians and change his “tone”—his angry rebuke—so that together they could share in the joy they had once experienced when Paul preached the gospel to them and they had accepted it in faith. Here we really do get a glimpse at the pastoral heart of Paul, and his uncompromising, yet tender concern for his flock.

It is this section of Galatians which reminds us of what we stand to lose if we ever return to the “basic principles of the world,” and likewise see our own obedience to the law of Moses as a means of justification. To put it bluntly, we risk losing everything!

First, let us not think for a moment that a similar occurrence cannot happen to us. If the Judaizers could work their way into a church that had been founded by the apostle Paul himself, just months earlier, they can worm their way in anywhere. We must always be on our guard for any form of legalism, for the first person who is seduced by such deceivers is the person who says, “it can never happen to me.” We must, like Paul, evaluate everything taught in the church by the word of God, and even if an angel from heaven, a Reformed theologian, even your own pastor, teaches any gospel other than the one Paul teaches here in Galatians, they must be rebuked from the Scriptures. Please pray for all those who teach you. Please pray for your elders, who are entrusted with the task of shepherding God’s flock and driving the wolves away. The best defense against the false gospel is to know the true gospel. This is why catechism is so utterly vital and why we must teach it and the Scriptures to our children. Error is most easily exposed in the light of the truth.

Second, there is much to learn about today’s Judaizers from the Judaizers of Galatia. Today’s Judaizers usually procede by arguing that the gospel of free grace leads to license. They convincingly argue that *if* we teach that salvation is a free gift and that we are saved by the merits of Christ received by faith alone apart from works, then there is no role for humanity to play in salvation. It just doesn’t make sense for God to leave us out! Judaizers will contend that any abuse of freedom is proof that the gospel of free grace is dangerous. Freedom can be frightening for those who are used to being a slave. And so playing upon this fear and the abuse of freedom, the modern Judaizers rarely need to make a frontal assault upon the gospel.

² Fung, *Galatians*, pp. 202-203.

Instead, Judaizers advance their agenda not by leaps and bounds but by millimeters. Upon finding any abuse of freedom, the Judaizer argues that “we need a new law or a rule” to stop that particular behavior. This sounds like a good thing to do. Then, once the new rule is in place, the Judaizer says, “the truly converted would never do that,” i.e., “break the new rule.” Then they find another abuse, and pass another rule using the same rationale, and soon thereafter measure people by it. It all sounds so reasonable and it happens so slowly that often times we never notice. The rules might even be good rules and they might even stop the errant behavior. And before long we have been boiled alive, like the proverbial frog in the beaker of water, who does not squirm when the water temperature is brought up to fatal levels at such a slow pace that the poor frog never even notices. Before long, we are not looking to the cross and merits of Christ, we are looking to our own efforts.

Some of us will lose the assurance of our salvation, because we cannot keep the rules, and think that God has abandoned us. Some of us will be good at keeping the rules, and think that we are better than those who don't. Some of us will debate the rules and turn the church—which is to be a haven and a hospital for justified sinners—into a modern Sanhedrin, where we will miss the weightier matters because we were too busy fighting over trivialities. In any case, the first things to go are freedom in Christ and the joy of our salvation. Some may take this so far that they, like certain of the Galatians, risk falling from grace.

Third, it is no accident that when Paul speaks of slavery, he connects it to the loss of the Galatian's joy—“what happened?” Joy is that emotional state of confidence and comfort in knowing that our sins are forgiven and that we have been granted a right status before God. Joy is not the same thing as happiness and is not directly connected to the ups and downs and material well-being of daily life as is happiness. In the Scriptures, joy is the emotional response by the people of God to God's redemptive acts. It is produced by the knowledge that God is no longer angry at us since Christ has died for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification. Joy, in the biblical sense, is an emotion that arises as a response to the gospel and the declaration that we have “peace with God” through the blood of Christ.

But the false gospel of the Judaizers robs God's people of the assurance of salvation, thereby taking from us our only comfort in life and in death, and our joy. There is no joy in free men and women taking up again the shackles of slavery. It is important to notice that Paul, following the Psalmist, directly connects the forgiveness of sins with joy. In Psalm 51, David pleads with God to restore to him the “joy of his salvation,” which had been lost to him when he felt God's anger towards his sin. David longs to once again hear “joy and gladness,” since he knows that the wickedness of his own heart has manifested itself in sin. Likewise, Paul's gospel of Christ crucified had created joy among the Galatians, as they too came to know that Christ had died for their sins and they were forgiven.

It is the Judaizer who tells the free man or woman to put back on the chains of salvation by works. It is the Judaizer who tells us to get up from this feast that God has prepared for those who love him and instead go and seek the inheritance in the desert wilderness of Sinai. It is the Judaizer who tells us to forsake Christ and instead seek the slave-master in Egypt and the captor of Babylon. It is the Judaizer who says, “we cannot be justified by the merits of Christ alone, but must add to Christ's merit our own.” It is no wonder Paul asks the Galatians, “what has happened to your joy?”

But it is Paul who says in Galatians 2:20, “Christ loved me and gave himself for me.” It is Paul who tells us that we are heirs to the inheritance and all the promises God made to Abraham through faith in Christ. It is Paul who says to us that through faith alone, we have been justified and given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Here, then, is where we find our joy—in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God has never promised us happiness, but he does promise us joy! And while the Judaizers will do their best to steal from us whatever joy we do have, God continually comes to us through word and Sacrament and says to us: “you are not guilty for all your many sins because Christ has died for them. Your filthy rags of unrighteousness have been replaced by the glorious righteousness of Christ.” It is in this wonderful declaration that we find joy.

But it is this message that the Judaizers attack and this is why we must always oppose them. This is why we must shout the gospel from the rooftops, for the darkness of error is dispelled in the light of the truth! This is why we must hear it again as often as possible.

For it is only in the saving work of Christ—not in our own obedience—that we find the joy of salvation!

Amen!