

## INTRODUCTION

We've all seen special-occasion cakes that have a message spelled out in the frosting. There's a collection of pictures of funny messages called Cake Wrecks. Apparently, some of these cake decorators had someone order a cake over the phone and they took their verbal instructions literally. There's one that says, "Best Wishes, Suzanne." The frosting says, "Under neat that We will miss you." Another funny cake says, "Comguadulations Under neat that on your weeding (in green)." Obviously, there's no spell-check for frosting. Another one says, "Write 'welcome' on it." A graduation cake says, "I want sprinkles." I like the one that says, "CC Just like that no periods." Another favorite of mine is from Canada and says, "Shools out!" Maybe it shouldn't be out for the person that spelled that! One of my favorites announces a birth and says, "It a gril." And finally, there's one where the person must have said, "I want NOTHING on it." That's what they got!

Obviously, these cake decorators misunderstood the instructions of those ordering the cakes. That was the problem in the churches in Galatia—they misunderstood the message of grace. They tried to add to the simple message of salvation by grace. Instead of cake wrecks, the result was church wrecks, Christians going back into religious legalism.

Remember, this was a personal letter Paul sent to the people he considered to be his spiritual children. In this passage we learn some personal details about Paul and how he first met the people in Galatia.

Galatians 4:12-20. "I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. 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. 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. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? 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. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you. 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!"

I mentioned in the last message that Paul's desire for his spiritual children is the same desire I have for you—that Christ be formed in you. When Jesus comes into your heart you don't become Christ-like overnight. It's a gradual process. Paul wrote about this ongoing process to the believers at Philippi. "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)

As the Christians in Galatia strayed from the grace-way back into legalism, this process was reversed: They weren't becoming more like Christ; they were becoming less and less like Christ. The harshest words ever recorded from the lips of Jesus were His remarks to the Jewish Pharisees, they were the super-legalists of the day. They believed the only way to please God

was to keep every single law and command God had given; they even added to God’s laws. We have Pharisees with us today. They feel good by keeping rules, and they even want to enforce those rules on others. As a result, there’s no joy, only obligation. Let’s dig a little deeper into these verses to uncover three powerful principles.

### **1. When we help hurting people, it’s like helping Jesus**

As Paul recalled how the believers welcomed him he wrote, “You welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.” Acts 13-14 records the account of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. This is when he first visited Galatia, but Acts doesn’t tell us anything about his illness. It’s only in this letter that we discover that Paul visited Galatia because of an illness that plagued him. Some scholars suggest Paul suffered from an eye disease that rendered his appearance revolting. The word “illness” literally means a physical infirmity, and it could refer to a disease or an injury. In Acts 14 we know Paul had been stoned in Lystra. The Bible says, “Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe [which was part of Galatia].” (Acts 14:19-20)

When the Jews stoned someone they didn’t use little pebbles; they used rocks about the size of a loaf of bread. Stoning was always capital punishment, the one being stoned wasn’t meant to survive. It’s possible the stones damaged Paul’s eyes. We’ll probably never know for sure until we see Paul in heaven, but the point is not what happened to him, but how the Christians in Galatia helped him. They didn’t treat him with contempt or scorn; instead they welcomed him like an angel or like he was Jesus Christ himself. Out of compassion, the believers would have been willing to pluck out their eyes and give them to Paul.

According to Jesus, when you show compassion for hurting people, it’s as if you are showing your love directly to Jesus. He said, “When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:38-40)

What if Jesus appeared to you this afternoon and said, “Hey would you loan me some money?” You might be thinking, “That’s strange, I didn’t think Jesus needed money.” But chances are you’d say, “Sure, Lord. How much do you need?” That’s exactly what you’re doing when you show compassion to someone who is suffering. The Bible says, “He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.” (Proverbs 19:17)

### **Powerpoint: What we call a problem, God calls an opportunity**

Before we leave this point, let me add what I’m calling a Powerpoint: What we call a problem, God calls an opportunity. Paul said it was because of an illness (or injury) that he came to preach the gospel to them. God specializes in turning what we call problems into opportunities for His glory.

That’s true in my life. When I was just a freshman in high school I was one of two freshmen playing on our varsity football team. I loved football and it was all I thought about. Then one day in practice I broke my ankle. When you’re carried off with an injury during a game, everyone applauds. But when you’re injured at practice, there’s nobody to clap for you. During that time I was pretty depressed. While all my friends were playing sports, I was on the sidelines with crutches. I was angry at God and pretty sour on life in general. But my mom refused to let me simmer in my own pity party. One day she brought home a guitar and a Mel Bay instruction book. She said, “Instead of sitting around and feeling sorry for yourself, do something. During the time you can’t play sports, you can learn to play the guitar.” So I threw myself into learning to play the guitar with the same passion I had devoted to sports. I practiced on that cheap guitar until my fingers bled, and pretty soon I was playing chords.

I finally got off crutches and played sports again, but was never as fast or as strong as before my injury. But as I look back on that, I’m thankful for my injury, because it forced me to learn to play the guitar, and the years I served as a youth pastor in college leading praise and worship with my guitar was a great blessing. At age 59, I don’t really care to get back on the football field; but I’m still getting great joy in playing the guitar and singing praises to God. What I called a problem, God called an opportunity.

What problem are you facing right now? Don’t despair; God can turn that problem into an opportunity. Problems are opportunities in disguise. It was Dale Carnegie who first wrote, “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade.” That’s just positive thinking, which doesn’t require God. Instead just remember: “When life hands you lemons, you can make lemonade, but only God can make it sweet!”

## **2. You can’t lose your salvation, but you can lose the joy of your salvation**

Paul asked a very important question, “What has happened to all your joy?”

There are some Christians who believe you can lose your salvation. They think there is something a Christian can *do* that would cause them to no longer be a child of God. We believe there’s nothing we can *do* to become a child of God, so there’s nothing you can *do* to lose that position. Once God has placed you into His family by a new birth, no one or nothing can cause you to lose your relationship with Him. You don’t have to work to keep your salvation; He is keeping you. Jesus compared us with sheep in John 10. He said, “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.” (John 10:29) If I was holding on to God’s hand, I might slip out of His grip because I’m not that strong. But it’s God who is holding on to me, and Jesus said that no one can snatch us out of God’s hand.

Ray Stedman wrote, “Ask yourself the question, ‘How long will my children be my children?’ They may disobey you. They may leave home. They may disappoint you. But they are still always your children. Such is the case with those God calls His children.”

You can’t lose your salvation, but you can lose the JOY of your salvation. Let me mention two joy-killers in the Christian life: Legalism and sin.

The problem with legalism is that none of us can keep all the rules all the time. And if your joy is dependent on how many of God’s commands you keep, you’ll never be satisfied. You’ll always be thinking about how you could have and should have done better.

One of my most embarrassing memories was when I was a pastor in Alabama and I went to youth camp. I was young and athletic, and we were playing softball. A teenage girl was pitching. As I walked up to the plate I was thinking about how far I was going to hit it. It was slow pitch softball, so as this girl lobbed the ball in I took a mighty swing—and missed. For the next pitch I decided to ease off and just hit it to right field. She pitched again and “swing and a miss, strike two!” By now, all I’m thinking about is just making contact with the ball. Here came the third pitch and I whiffed it. Strike three. Everyone on the field laughed and cheered at my expense. A 13-year-old girl with braces had struck me out. I was able to laugh at myself as well, but I felt like a failure. Have you ever felt that way? That’s how keeping rules makes you feel. Even the best major league batters get hits in only about three in ten tries. God’s law demands that you bat 1,000. It only leads to frustration. There’s no joy in religious legalism. Joyless religion is like going into a nice restaurant and eating the paper menu instead of enjoying the food. Joyless religion is like looking at the score of Mozart’s Night Music instead of listening to the beautiful music itself.

Another thing that can rob you of your joy is sin. King David was a man after God’s own heart. Yet, later in life, he became spiritually lazy and committed adultery with Bathsheba. To make matters worse, he had her husband, Uriah, killed to cover up for his mistake. For months, David hid his sin and as he did, he lost his joy. He became bitter and critical. Finally, God sent a prophet, Nathan, to point out David’s sin. Psalm 51 records the powerful prayer of repentance that David offered to God. He begged God to “Create in me a clean heart, Oh God.” Then he prayed, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.” (Psalm 51:12) There was never a moment David ceased to be a child of God. His relationship with God was intact, but sin had caused him to lose fellowship with God, and in the process David lost his joy.

If you find that there’s no joy in your life, ask the Holy Spirit to shine His spotlight into your heart. If there’s any unconfessed sin, do like David did and ask God to cleanse your heart and to restore the joy of your salvation.

**Powerpoint: Happiness is a thermometer; joy is a thermostat**

A thermometer just measures the temperature, but a thermostat *sets* the desired temperature. Happiness is an emotion, and like a thermometer it simply measures our circumstances. When things are going great, we’re happy, but when things are tough, we aren’t happy. Joy, on the other hand, is a choice we can make. Joy isn’t giddiness, it is a calm assurance that whatever happens in life, that God is going to carry us through it and work it out for our good and His glory. Happiness is dependent on happenings; and they rise and fall. But joy is dependent on Jesus and He is the same yesterday, today, and forever more! How’s your joy? Have you lost the joy of your salvation?

William Barclay writes, “The Christian is a person of joy...A gloomy Christian is a contradiction

of terms, and nothing in history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces.” Billy Sunday was the fiery American evangelist about a generation before Billy Graham. He said, “If you have no joy, there’s a leak in your Christianity somewhere.”

### **3. It’s great to be excited if you’re excited about things that matter for eternity**

These false teachers had a lot of zeal and excitement about their teaching. But Paul said it was the wrong kind of zeal. He wrote, “It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good.”

We’re in the middle of March Madness, but if you follow the NFL, you know Peyton Manning recently signed with the Denver Broncos. So Tim Tebow was looking for another team and he signed with the New York Jets. Last Monday, Tim had his first press conference as a member of the Jets. In the space of just a few minutes he used the word “excited” 44 times.

I’m a big fan of Tim Tebow because he has stated many times that his priorities in life are: Faith in Jesus Christ; His family; and then football. He’s excited about being a Jet, but he’s most excited about the opportunity to spread the Word of God around the world. Football won’t matter a thousand years from today, but spreading God’s Word will still be relevant a million years from today. Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Mark 13:31)

The Jewish Pharisees were some of the most religious zealots of history. But just because you’re excited about something doesn’t make it true. Paul had this to say about those who were zealous to keep God’s laws, “They (the Jews) are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” (Romans 10:2-4)

Righteousness is not a state of moral perfection that you can earn by obeying God. It is a gift from God and can only be received by faith.

We should always be looking at life from the perspective of eternity. A couple received an email from their daughter at college that read: “Dear Mom and Dad, Thought I’d drop you a note to let you know what’s been happening. We had a fire at the dorm the other night and it was destroyed—but don’t worry because I moved in with a nice guy I’ve been seeing named Jim. He quit high school after the 11th grade to get married—but don’t worry because he’s talking about getting a divorce. I think I may be pregnant—but don’t worry, we’re talking about getting married.” The parents were reeling with shock when they scrolled down a little farther and read: “Don’t worry—everything I’ve written is false. There was no fire and there’s no Jim, but I did get a C- in French and I flunked Calculus. I just wanted you to put everything in its proper perspective.” We should always look at life from the perspective of eternity, and when we do, we won’t sweat the small stuff; and we realize that all stuff is small stuff compared to eternity.

**POWERPOINT:** Will your primary passion in life matter 10,000 years from today?

If I asked you, “What is your primary passion in life?” how would you answer? Don’t give me an answer you think the preacher wants to hear. What is it that makes your heart beat faster when you think about it? What is it that gives you greatest sense of joy? You may not be able to answer that question, so let me pose it in a different way. What if I went to the person who knows you better than anyone else and I asked that person to tell me what your primary passion in life is. What would THEY say? Then ask yourself, “Will that matter 10,000 years from today?”

You weren’t made for just this life. God created you to enjoy eternity with Him. We are slaves to time and space, but that’s in our lost, physical condition. We weren’t created for time, but for eternity. That’s why it says in Ecclesiastes 3:11, “God has put eternity in our hearts.”

Salvation is God taking you out of time and placing you in eternity. C. S. Lewis once said that if you want to compare time and eternity, consider eternity as a long, endless roll of white butcher paper with neither beginning nor end. And then he said take a pencil, and on that white butcher paper, draw a horizontal line one-half inch long. And then draw two little vertical lines at the end of that horizontal line to mark off a beginning and an end. He says that little half-inch pencil mark is not your life. That’s all of time, which has a beginning and an end. And then imagine the butcher paper is as wide as it is long and it is as thick as it is long. That’s the comparison of time to eternity. God didn’t make you for time; He made you for eternity.

## CONCLUSION

Have you lost the joy of your salvation? Are you excited about living for Jesus? Tim Hansel wrote a great book entitled *You Gotta’ Keep Dancing*. In it he says that pain is unavoidable but misery is option. We can CHOOSE joy in any situation.

I read about an 83-year old retired pastor who was going through a period of sadness. His wife had died a few years earlier. He’d been diagnosed with skin cancer, and had undergone 15 surgeries to his face which had left him disfigured. He felt all alone and he became more and more reclusive.

Someone gave him Tim Hansel’s book, *You Gotta’ Keep Dancing*. He read it. Let me read you his response: “After I put the book down I said, ‘The man is crazy. I cannot choose joy.’ Then I read in John 15:11 that Jesus said joy is a gift. He said, ‘I want to give you My joy so that your joy may be complete.’ I didn’t know what to do so I got on my knees and said, ‘Lord, if joy is a gift, then give it to me!’ Suddenly this incredible hunk of joy overwhelmed me, landed on me. I was overwhelmed—it was like the joy talked about in Peter—a joy unspeakable and full of glory. I didn’t know what to say, so I said, ‘Turn it on, Lord! Turn it on!’ And before I knew it, I was dancing around the house! I thought, ‘After all, the book is called *You Gotta’ Keep Dancing*. I just had to get out of the house to tell someone. So I went down to the local fast food joint and got a hamburger. When the woman at the counter saw me she asked, ‘How are you doing today?’ I said, ‘I’m wonderful!’ ‘Is it your birthday?’ she asked. I said, ‘No, honey, it’s better than that!’ ‘Is it your anniversary?’ Better than that! It’s the joy of Jesus!”

So, what’s happened to your joy? If it’s gone, ask Jesus to give it back to you. I saw a t-shirt not long ago that said, “Today I will as happy as a bird with a French fry.” When was the last time you realized that God’s gift to you is joy unspeakable full of glory? It is our birthright as His children. So, don’t let anyone or anything steal your joy!

## OUTLINE

### 1. When we help hurting people, it's like helping Jesus

"When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?...Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." *Matthew 25:38-40*

Powerpoint: What we call a problem, God calls an opportunity

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes