

SONS OF ABRAHAM
PART 15

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:10-14

June 20, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

The issue, as we have learned, that Paul is dealing with in Galatians is: How is a man justified? How does a man come to stand in a right relationship with God? How does one come into and remain under God's favor and goodwill?

Paul takes up this question and answers it in Galatians 3:10-14. In this section, Paul sets forth 4 arguments based on the OT Scriptures (Lev., Deut., Hab.), which prove the impossibility of justification by works of the law.

I. THE OT SCRIPTURES TEACH THAT THE LAW ISSUES A SENTENCE OF CURSING RATHER THAN BLESSING (3:10).

Those who rely on doing good works and their own performance to earn God's justifying favor are under a curse. Why? Because, the Scriptures (Deut. 27:26) teach that everyone who does not abide by ALL things written in the Book of the Law, and do them are cursed. The standard of God's law is perfection, which no fallen person can achieve.

II. THE OT SCRIPTURES CLEARLY REVEAL THAT NO ONE IS JUSTIFIED BY WORKS OF THE LAW (v. 11).

Why? Because, the Scriptures (Hab. 2:4) teach that those who are justified live by faith.

III. THE OT SCRIPTURES (LEV. 18:5) TEACH THAT THE LAW AND FAITH ARE WHOLLY INCOMPATIBLE IN REGARD TO JUSTIFICATION (v. 12).

The Law and faith are not mutually compatible ways that lead to a right relationship with God. The law and faith (gospel) operate on two mutually exclusive principles for justification. Again, Paul argues from the Scriptures (Lev. 18:5) that the Law grants life only on the condition of perfect obedience. The Law operates on the principle, "Do this and you shall live." But, the gospel operates on the principle, "Live and you shall do this."

This then, Paul argues, is our dilemma:

God is holy and just and His justice is unbending and unyielding. Only a perfect righteousness that satisfies both the Law's requirements and penalties will satisfy God's holy and just nature. Yet, because of our law breaking, we do not inwardly / inherently possess a perfect righteousness, which is able to satisfy the Law's requirements and penalties. How then can we have any hope to come into

a right relationship with a just and holy God, whose law we have broken and authority we have spurned? How can we escape the curse of God's Law?

Paul gives the answer in v. 13. He reveals that Jesus has done for us on the cross what we could never do by our own works and performance.

LESSON:

IV. THE OT SCRIPTURES TEACH THAT THE CURSE OF GOD'S LAW HAS BEEN REMOVED BY CHRIST'S WORK ON THE CROSS (VV. 13-14).

Of all the texts which make reference to the atonement, none are more crucial or important as to its nature than Gal. 3:13 (cf. George Smeaton, *The Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement*, p. 244).

Paul grounds his argument in Deuteronomy 21:23, which teaches that a lawbreaker is hanged on a tree because he is accursed (cf. Acts 5:30; 1 Pet. 2:24).

Jesus, Paul states, was hung on a cross because He was made a curse for us. He died on the cross in order to bear the curse of the law for believers. His death was a judicial act of God whereby God charged the guilt of our lawbreaking to Him as Isaiah wrote,

⁵ ...He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

Paul's statement is quite startling. In fact, one Bible commentator notes that we should not have dared to use it had Paul not written it. What we are dealing with here in v. 13 is a vastness of truth that is unsearchable. George Smeaton discussing Galatians 3:13 writes, "The price or ransom paid for us was nothing else but the personal Redeemer, the Son of God condescending to be made a curse for us; a thought so vast and unfathomable, that though our minds grow familiar with the phraseology, we are for ever incapable of comprehending or fully surveying it," (*The Apostle's Doctrine of the Atonement*, p. 246).

By quoting this passage in Deuteronomy, Paul understood that Christ's death was a substitution (i.e., that He bore the curse of the Law on our behalf, "for us"). Here Paul sets forth the actual punishment for sin.

Paul's use of the term "curse" is taken from the covenant blessings and curses spoken of in Deuteronomy 27-28. The "curse" comprehends all the penalties stipulated in the Law (i.e., covenantal curses) for those who disobey. But what does this ultimately look like?

In order to more fully understand this “curse” and to better comprehend what Christ was actually doing on the cross (i.e., the atonement), you need to understand what it means to be blessed.

One of the best explanations of what it means to be “blessed,” is found in Numbers 6:24-26, which is referred to as the Priestly or Aaronic Blessing, which reads,

“²⁴ The Lord bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”

All three verses essentially mean the same thing (synthetic parallelism). Different terms are used for poetic richness to emphasize one main message. So, to be “blessed” by the Lord is to have His face shining upon you, to have His countenance upon you (i.e., to have “His face” of presence turned toward you in grace, which results in peace.).

Peace is the result of grace. Grace releases us from sin and peace quiets our conscience.

Peace can never be had until our sin is first forgiven. Paul echoes this in his greeting in Galatians 1:3.

To be “cursed” then is for God to turn His face of grace and peace away from you. It is to have God turn His back on you and bring justice. What does God’s justice look like?

Paul says Christ’s death on the cross is the clearest display of God’s justice in action. As Jesus hung on the cross, God the Father turned His Face of grace and peace away from His Son and poured out His justice.

This “curse” then especially involves the loss of God’s gracious favor / presence as Isaiah 59:2 says, “but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.”

George Smeaton discussing Christ’s bearing of the curse writes, “It (i.e., curse) consisted especially in the privation of God, and in the desertion, which extorted from Him many agonizing complaints; for the worst ingredient of the curse is the loss of God, or the absence and complete withdrawal of God from a human soul, made to be His habitation,” (*The Apostles’ Doctrine of the Atonement*, p. 248).

Jesus was literally “cut off” from God’s gracious favor. The sign of the old covenant was circumcision. When a Jew underwent circumcision, he was saying to God, “If I fail to keep the terms of this covenant, may I be cut off from your presence, from your grace and peace (i.e., your blessing) just as I have cut off the foreskin of my flesh.”

Of course all of Israel failed to keep God's Law as well as every Gentile (cf. Rom. 3:23). This is what necessitated Christ having to be "cut off" (lit. circumcised) from the eternal favor and fellowship He enjoyed with His Father in order to redeem us from the curse of the Law.

In Colossians 2:11, Paul calls the cross the circumcision of Christ. Through the cross, Jesus was "cut off" in accursed darkness and death as the prophet Isaiah declared in Isaiah 53:8, "By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?"

R.C. Sproul writes,

"The cross was the supreme circumcision. When Jesus took the curse on Himself and so identified with our sin that He became a curse, God cut Him off, and justly so. At the moment when Christ took on Himself the sin of the world, His figure on the cross was the most grotesque, most obscene mass of concentrated sin in the history of the world. God is too holy to look on iniquity, so when Christ hung on the cross, the Father, as it were, turned His back. He averted His face and He cut off His Son. Jesus, Who, touching His human nature, had been in a perfect, blessed relationship with God throughout His ministry, now bore the sin of God's people, and so He was forsaken by God," (*The Truth of the Cross*, p. 134).

And so the "curse" Christ suffered culminated in the wrath of God (i.e., God's justice in action, rendering to every lawbreaker his just due). By becoming the object of God's wrath (i.e., justice in action), Jesus assumed the place of a sin-bearer as if He had been the sinner. The Law's condemnation was visited upon Him instead of us. He was hanged on a tree because He was made a curse for us. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

As a result, of His substitution, our redemption was secured and Christ becomes to all who trust in Him an inexhaustible fountain of divine favor and blessing! Paul states in Galatians 3:14, "so that (i.e., the purpose for Christ becoming a curse) in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."

In this verse, Paul brings to a conclusion his entire argument that he began in 3:6. If you recall, the Judaizers falsely taught that by virtue of physical descent from Abraham as well as the observance of the ceremonial Laws of Moses, one was a true son of Abraham (i.e., inherited the blessing of Abraham; cf. Lk. 3:8; Jn. 8:33ff.).

In contrast, Paul is arguing that there is no other means of obtaining the blessing (i.e., justification [the favor of God] and reception of the Holy Spirit [regeneration]) than by the way Abraham obtained it (i.e., faith alone).

Jews and Gentiles alike have been redeemed from the curse of the Law through the redemption of Christ. Both groups are justified alike. Both have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. God has never had two different plans of salvation, one for the Jews and one for Gentiles. There has always been just one method of justification ever since God announced His first promise immediately after the Fall in Gen. 3:15.

All men are sons of Abraham through faith in Christ's redemption (Gal. 3:7; 3:26). And so, Paul brings his argument to a fitting conclusion by stating that the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham comes through the person and work of Christ.

Paul is saying that Jesus was cursed so that we might be blessed! With the curse lifted, His blessings can flow! Jesus bore the curse of the law for us so that we may obtain the blessing of Abraham, namely justification and the reception of the Holy Spirit (i.e., regeneration; v. 14).

Jesus becomes to all who trust in Him alone, an inexhaustible fountain of blessing just as was promised to Abraham in Genesis 15:1, "Fear not, Abram: I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward." God promises to protect and preserve His people from every evil and makes Himself to be a fountain of every blessing (cf. Eph. 1:3ff).

This, Paul argues, was the purpose for why Jesus became a curse for us.

REFLECTION:

In Galatians 3:10-14, Paul has set forth two mutually exclusive alternatives for justification: Law and faith/gospel, which result in two totally different destinies: blessing or cursing.

Understanding the "curse" enables us to better grasp Galatians 3:10 where Paul writes, "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse..." To be under a "curse" is to experience the absence and complete withdrawal of God's gracious presence from your soul, which was made to be His habitation.

God's presence, before the Fall, constituted the greatest blessing for man. But, when man rejected God's rule and broke His Law, man no longer enjoyed God's presence as a blessing.

The worst consequence for Adam and Eve after their sin was to be banished from the gracious presence of God in the Garden of Eden. The story of the Bible could have ended with man's hopeless state, condemned under God's curse. God didn't have to intervene. But, because He is a gracious, promising God, He chose to!

Immediately after the fall of man, God announces an unexpected word of promise, the first doctrine of grace, the gospel in Genesis 3:15. The rest of the unfolding story of the Bible shows how God, based on faithfulness to His

promise, begins to restore man back to Himself so man once again enjoys His presence as blessing rather than cursing.

In Revelation 22:3-4, John says the curse will one day be fully removed and God's face will forever be turned toward His people in grace and blessing.

“³No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His servants will worship Him. ⁴They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.”

Here, John reveals the ultimate aim of Christ's redemptive work on the cross.

Through Christ's sin bearing death, which reverses the curse and by virtue of His victorious resurrection, which inaugurates a new age, every square inch of God's creation will ultimately be filled with His presence in blessing!

The promise of Genesis 3:15 and the promise made to Abraham (Genesis 15:1ff.) will be fully consummated. Because of the gospel, all the harmful effects of the curse will be reversed as Isaac Watts' famous Christmas hymn declares,

“No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found...”

Whereas as Moses could not see the Lord's face and live (Ex. 33:20–23; 34:29–35), when the Holy Spirit has completed the believer's sanctification, believers will be able to see God's face once again.

Just as in the Garden before the Fall, this vision of God will be the greatest blessing of the new creation. God will turn His face toward His people with favor and delight. And John says His name will be on their foreheads (i.e., They will be sealed forever as the Lord's purchased, protected property).

All the promises of God, which find their YES! in Christ, will blossom into their fullest expression. God's people will be united together in God's place, joyfully submitting to God's rule and therefore enjoying God's presence and thus perfect blessing.

The implications of this truth for our lives are unending.

For believers, the gospel assures us that despite our ongoing failures in sanctification, we no longer have to live in fear of the possibility of experiencing God's curse.

Jesus redeemed us from the curse! He stood in our place bearing the wrath and justice of God for us. He was forsaken by the Father, “cut off,” for our sin. He drank the cup of God's wrath in our place, down to its very last drop. He fully exhausted it on our behalf.

And so John can write in 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."

For those who have not trusted in Christ, there is great reason to fear and dread this curse.

Jesus, in Matthew 10:28 says, "... do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Yet, though there is cause to fear, there is also cause for great hope because of Christ. To all who fear, there is Good News!

In Luke 2:10-11, the angel announces to the shepherds, "¹⁰ Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Because of this Good News, let me encourage you in prospect of that Great Day, trust in Christ, in whom the curse has been removed and where life and blessing abounds.

"Come to Him, by owning that you cannot come of yourself. Come to Him, by believing that you are cursed, wretched, and undone without Him, and that you shall be blessed and happy in Him. Come to Him, by believing that you have no righteousness but guilt, no strength but weakness; and that in the Lord only you have righteousness and strength. Come to Him, by believing that you have nothing, and that He hath all; and that you can do nothing, and He can do all for you... Whosoever will, let him come and take of the water of life freely," (*The Works of Ralph Erskine, vol. 2, "A Promising God, A Performing God,"* pp. 371-372).

Paul's teaching in this passage is straightforward. The alternative of Law is to trust in your own works, which leads only to cursing. The way of faith is to trust in the finished work of Christ alone, which leads to abundant blessing.

Let us renounce our foolish pride in thinking we can earn God's favor and make ourselves righteous by our own works. Let us instead come humbly to the cross where Jesus redeemed us from the curse and trust only in Him.

And because we are in Christ through faith alone, we will receive the blessings of justification and regeneration (i.e., the gift of the Holy Spirit) and thereby be called true Sons of Abraham.

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