**CHRIST REDEEMED US FROM THE CURSE OF THE LAW**

March 2, 2014

Galatians 3:1-29

Key Verse 3:13 “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’”

In chapters 1 and 2 we studied how Paul was distressed and angry because the Galatians were following another gospel, one that proclaimed salvation by observing the law. The Galatians had been led astray by some false teachers, who insisted that the Galatians should keep the law. After becoming Christians, many people attempt to keep the law instead of continuing in faith. They want to do something for God in their own strength. It gives them intense satisfaction to feel that there is something they can do to win God’s smile. If they seem to succeed, they become self-righteous and proud. When they fail, they fall into a sense of condemnation. Their service to God is burdensome and futile; they have little joy or peace in their hearts. In the long run, they feel that their life is cursed. On the other hand, those who live by faith always remember that we are saved only by faith in Jesus Christ; there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Man’s righteous acts are like filthy rags before God (Isa 64:6). Based on the grace of Jesus, they serve God through the help of the Holy Spirit. They are humble, willing, thankful, joyful and fruitful. This is a blessed life. In today’s passage, Paul teaches the Galatians the difference between faith and the law. May God help us to realize what Christ has done to set us free from the curse of the law, and make us sons of God.

Look at verse 1. “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.” To Paul, the Galatians’ flirtation with moralism and the law was foolishness itself, and the result of the devil’s deception. The gospel message is simple and vivid. The Son of God came to this world to die as the Lamb of God for the sin of the world. He was crucified, and shed his blood from the cross, though he had not sinned. Then God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day, proving that he was the Son of God, and exalting him as King of kings and Lord of lords. Paul, as an apostle of Christ Jesus, had come to the Galations as a witness of Christ's death and resurrection. He portrayed it to them vividly, so that there would be no doubt that the Son of God had come and was crucified like a criminal for them. What happened when the Galations heard the gospel? They believed what they heard, and immediately the Spirit of God came to their hearts, and began to work in them, changing them from wretched sinners under the power of sin and death into the holy children of God. They believed what they heard, and miracles happened. They were so happy when they just heard and believed. Paul later says that in their joy they would have torn out their eyes and given them to Paul in his sickness, if they could have.

But false teachers came along, and tricked the Galatians’ consciences. They said to them, “You have been saved through faith in Christ? Amen, brother. Now, you can be really spiritual! All you have to do is obey these laws, these ancient, holy laws given through Moses. That’s why Christ saved you, don’t you see?” It seemed reasonable that since Christ was a Jew, he had saved Gentiles so that they could become Jews, too. As Jews, theirs would be promises of God given to Abraham and the patriarchs. Theirs would be the inheritance of the kingdom of Israel. Their goal was noble and right. But they were wrong to assume that they would obtain that goal through their own efforts to obey the law. Look at verses 2,3. “I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?

Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” In these verses Paul reveals the bankruptcy of the idea-‘Saved by faith--sanctified by the law.’ When the Galatians believed the gospel, they received the Holy Spirit in their hearts. The Spirit rebuked them for their sins. The Spirit led them to repentance and to deeper faith in Christ and love for God. The Spirit encouraged them in the midst of persecutions to hold on to the promise of God and the kingdom of God. In short, when the Galatians believed, they invited the Spirit to come in and make them a new creation in Christ Jesus. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe, from first to last (Rom 1:16,17). Nowhere and at no time is the gospel about what men can do for themselves or for God. Sanctification is the work of the Spirit, given by faith in Christ Jesus. What the Spirit began in the Galatians’ hearts, only the Spirit could complete. But the Galatians foolishly listened to the false teachers, and began trying to accomplish the Spirit’s work by their human efforts.

In verses 6,7, Paul gives the example of Abraham. “So also Abraham ‘believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.” Jews regard Abraham as a person who perfectly observed God’s law. Jewish Rabbis teach that Abraham attained the knowledge of the law at the age of three and perfected his observance of the law when he offered his son Isaac to God. But, when his faith was credited to him as righteousness, he was not perfect at all. Rather he fell into fear of death in a foreign land and was grumbling to God for giving him no children inside the dark tent. Then God took him outside and said, “Look at the stars...so shall your offspring be.” God's promise was so great that it seemed irrational and ridiculous. How could Abraham believe such a great promise? Mysteriously, however, Abraham believed the Lord. Then the Lord credited it to him as righteousness. God was pleased by his faith and gave Abraham an A+. All those who have faith in God like Abraham did are the children of Abraham. They are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

In verses 10-12 Paul quoted Old Testament references to explain that there are two ways to seek righteousness. He quoted Habbakuk 2:4, which says, “the righteous will live by faith,” and Leviticus 18:5, which says, “the man who does these things will live by them.” Both are the words of God and promise us eternal life. But they are very different. The first way to eternal life is to have a right relationship with God by faith. The second way to eternal life is to keep the law. What is the problem? The problem is we cannot keep the law in order to have eternal life. Verse 10 says, “For all who rely on observing the law are under a curse, as it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’” This is a quotation from Deuteronomy 27:26. Here we can find the nature of the law. The law demands perfect obedience. We cannot pick what we like to obey and discard what we dislike. We have to obey all the laws of God without fail. Mr. Law is a perfectionist. He is disciplined, intelligent, and a master of all trades. So, many women are eager to marry him. But after the wedding they experience a very painful reality. Every morning he gets up at 4:00 a.m., reads the Bible and prays. He works hard twelve hours a day, keeps time precisely, and never makes a mistake. He does so without fail. And he demands his wife to do so. If she fails to do one small thing, he condemns her without mercy. This goes on every day, day after day, without ceasing. Can anyone bear being married to Mr. Law? Even though one keeps 99% of the law, if he breaks one law, he becomes a lawbreaker. Paul shared his testimony in Romans 7. He kept most commandments. However, the commandment, “Do not covet,” which deals with the inner life, convicted him of sin. Because he had broken this one law, he became like one who broke all the laws. He was condemned and destined to die. So he cried out, “What a wretched man I am!”

Paul continued to talk about the nature of the law in verse 12. It says, “The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, ‘The man who does these things will live by them.’” This means the law is not based on God’s grace but on human effort alone. Yet we do not have the power to keep the law. And when we fail to keep even one of God’s laws, it brings curse upon us. We are condemned without mercy and receive a death penalty. God is holy. There is no exception. Whether Jew or Gentile, all are under a curse because of disobedience to the law of God. But God is love. In his great mercy, he provided a way for us to be saved.

Look at verse 13. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” Simply speaking, to redeem is to pay the price to free a slave. Because of disobedience all men became slaves of sin. There was no way out without paying the full price for our sins. Jesus paid it all for us. Jesus, who is in very nature God, kept all the law perfectly from beginning to end. Jesus was sinless. But he was condemned and crucified as a criminal. He became a curse in our places. Isaiah cried out: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities” (Isa 53:4-5). Those who rely on what Jesus has done are freed from the curse of the law to live a new life. Look at verse 14. “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” Praise God who redeemed us from the curse of the law through the cross of Christ, so that the promise of the Spirit might be ours by faith.

We are not Jews, and we are not familiar with the absolute strictness with which they strive to live according to their law. But we can understand the curse of the law by considering our own struggles to live up to the expectations of those around us, such as to our parents. They have good intentions. Also many of expectations such as teaching the Bible and writing testimonies are good, designed to help us to grow. But the same rules and expectations become a burden when we try to do on our own strength. When I first believed in Jesus, I was very happy. I was full of zeal to please God by having many Bible studies. I was largely successful. Then I began to feel the pressure to teach the Bible and bring students to the conferences. Teaching the Bible became a burden. Then at one Easter Bible conference, I could not bring any student, even though I tried very hard. Everyone I invited made an excuse not to come. Then I broke down completely. I felt that I failed as a disciple. I even refused to share my testimony. Through my shepherd’s counseling, I then began to see Jesus on the cross and his grace. I could accept God’s grace for the forgiveness of sins by faith. After that, what other people thought of me did not matter. When other people say, “You don’t have many Bible studies,” then I would say, “I am a great sinner. Please pray for me.”

In verses 15-18, Paul explains to distinguish the promise and the law. In the promise God said, “I will...I will...I will....” But in the law of Moses, God said, “You shall...You shall not...You shall....” Upon this basis, John Stott commented: “The promise sets forth a religion of God—‘God’s plan,’ ‘God’s grace,’ ‘God’s initiative.’ But the law sets forth a religion of man—‘man’s duty,’ ‘man’s works,’ ‘man’s responsibility.’ The promise had only to be believed. But the law had to be obeyed. God’s dealings with Abraham were in the category of ‘promise,’ ‘grace’ and ‘faith.’ But God’s dealings with Moses were in the category of ‘law,’ ‘commandments,’ and ‘works.’ The conclusion to which Paul is leading is that the Christian religion is the religion of Abraham and not Moses, of promise and not law; and that Christians are enjoying today the promise which God made to Abraham centuries ago.”

Then the natural question arises: Verse 19 says, “What, then, was the purpose of the law?” Paul’s answer is clear. Look at verse 19b. “It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.” God delivered the Israelites by his mighty acts of judgment from slavery in Egypt and gave them the law in order to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5-6). They needed the law, because even though they were free, they still had the mentality of slaves. In reviewing Exodus, we find that they were ungrateful and ready to complain. They were greedy and sexually immoral in many ways. They quickly forgot God, fell into idolatry. The problem was that they did not have a consciousness of sin. It is like a mirror which reveals all our ugliness and sins. So God gave them the law to help them recognize sin as sin. When they properly diagnosed the problem they could realize that only God could help them. They could come to God as sinners for forgiveness and cleansing, which was offered through the sacrificial system--a shadow of Jesus’ atonement. Now we understand why God gave them the law. The role of the law was not to save them from their sins, but to provoke, expose, and condemn sin so that they might come to God for help. As they did so, they could be trained and sanctified and grow as God’s holy people.

Look at verse 26. “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith....” It is an amazing proclamation! According to the law, it was impossible for anyone to become a child of God. Man is born as a slave to sin. His position as a slave cannot be changed. Though his living situation may improve, his slave status cannot be changed. We were always under the condemnation of the law. We were guilty and fearful without remedy. This is still the present condition of those who don’t believe in Jesus. They try to be saved by works: daily prayer, almsgiving, fasting, pilgrimage, and so on. However, they are greatly burdened, without peace or joy. This is the condition of all who rely on keeping the law to be righteous. Through faith we are set free from bondage to sin and the law. Through faith we become children of God. In Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith (26). This is not just the improvement of our situation, such as becoming rich, being healed from a disease, winning a prestigious award, or marrying the most suitable person. But it is a fundamental change within us which brings us out of the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of light. It also changes us from poor beggars into privileged children. Our status is changed from slaves to children. We have many ups and downs. Sometimes we make mistakes and fail. However, God never cuts us off from being his children. Even though we fall short, we are still his precious children. This happens when we just believe in Jesus alone. What a blessing to become his children! It is totally out of God's love for us. 1 John 3:1 says, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are!” May God bless you with this assurance of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.