

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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The Sixth Petition (Part IX)

“Such is the popular conception of a curse--” writes Michael J. Glodo, “the mere utterance of profanities. While our world has perfected the art of profanity, cursing is unappreciated.”¹ In some parts of the country, hurling crude and profane epithets at people (and things) is colloquially called “cussing.” Our English word *curse* comes down to us from an Anglo-French term, *curuz* which meant “wrath.” Thus, to curse someone was to call down the wrath of God on them. It was the invoking of a divine imprecation. To curse someone meant that they were accursed by God. Cursing, as you can see, involved some theological understanding! I doubt if many people who flippantly use words like “hell” and “damn” (especially when this last word is divinely intensified) are self-consciously aware of the Biblical imagery their language actually involves. Paul’s argument in the third chapter of Galatians graphically unfolds what is really involved when someone is said to be *curse*d by God. The Apostle is forcefully arguing his case for justification by faith alone by first pointing the Galatians back to their own salvation experience (3:1-5) and then by appealing to the case of Abraham (3:6-9) and finally by pointing to what the Law really does – curse.

I. WHAT THE LAW BRINGS TO THOSE WHO THINK TO BE JUSTIFIED BY SEEKING TO KEEP IT

It is often thought that Paul’s opponents were in fact *really* keeping the Law. “The fact is,” observes Moises Silva, “that the apostle *nowhere* (in Galatians or in his other letters) characterizes his opponents as people who are obedient to the law. He will admit to no such thing. In this very epistle, as many have pointed out, he specifically accuses them of not keeping the law (6:13). And in Phil. 3:2-3, when describing a group of opponents who, to say the least, had some affinities with the Judaizers in Galatia, he deliberately depicts them as pagans. That general conviction could hardly have been foreign to the Galatian Christians. There is in fact every reason to believe that when they heard Paul describing his opponents as being of the works of the law, these Galatians knew that by that phrase he did *not* mean something like ‘these are the people who fulfill the law’! Or to put it differently, the Galatians could perfectly well understand (whether they agreed or not) why Paul would think of his opponents as people who did not ‘remain in all the things written in the book of the law to do them.’”²

For all who rely on *works of the law*: the same phrase is used in verses 2 and 5, with the addition of the word “all” (HOSOI), which makes it more comprehensive than Judaizers alone. Any who rely on legal efforts, whether Jew or Gentile, are included. Although Paul develops a new line of argument, he makes this connect up closely with the preceding argument, as is clear from the initial conjunction “for” (GAR). *Under a curse*: the idea is of separation from God and is the very antithesis of blessing. “Cursed be... *and do them*”: this quotation of Scripture is from Dt. 27:26, where it closes the list of curses pronounced at Mount Ebal. When Paul uses the formula “It is written” (GEGRAPTAI) he is doing so in more than a merely formal way. It is an assertion of the authority of Scripture. To show that Scripture itself demonstrates the judgment due to all who do not abide by everything in the law would clearly be an effective argument in refuting those who

were appealing to Scripture in support of a continued legal approach to righteousness. The point is not that justification by works of the law (such as circumcision) the Judaizers were, argues Paul, incurring a curse if they failed in any other part of it. The fact was that law as a means of salvation could bring only a curse and was therefore ineffective (cf. Bring). *Now it is evident*: the word used (DELON) means “clear to the mind”, in a way that should be generally admitted. The expression *Justified before God*: “before God” (PARA TO THEO) focuses attention on justification as seen in the eyes of God, and is contrasted with any human interpretation of justification. An altogether different standard would have obtained if man could have decided his own means. He would certainly have chosen a course which would have ministered to his pride, which is precisely the effect of the emphasis among the Judaizers on works of the law. *By the law*: it is important to note that throughout his argument Paul is not denying the function of law but only a legalistic interpretation of it.³

II. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE: ARGUMENT FROM THE CURSE OF THE LAW

The Judaizers wanted to introduce the Law into the gospel. Paul’s masterful grasp of the Old Testament is again demonstrated as he proceeds to show that righteousness cannot be had by the works of the Law. On the contrary, the Law can only condemn. All who seek justification by the Law are under a divine curse.

A. The Condemnation of the Law (3:10-12)

Suppose the Judaizers had responded to Paul’s appeal to Abraham by saying, “Well, Abraham’s case is different. He came *before* the Law. Now that we have the Law, things are different.” No, declares Paul, it is *impossible* to be justified by the Law. He supports his case by appealing to Deuteronomy 27:6; 21:23 and Habakkuk. There are *four* specific things that should drive every legalist out of his false sense of security:

1. The Law must be *continually* kept.
2. *Every aspect of the Law must be kept (cf. James 2:10).*
3. *All of the Law (moral, civil and ceremonial) must be kept.*
4. The Law must be *done*. There is no stopping short of 100% doing (cf. Acts 15:10).

B. The Curse of Christ (3:13)

Thomas Goodwin, one of the great Puritan divines, highlighted three ways Christ was made a curse.

“1. This curse was not merely the curse of the judicial law, or of a malefactor hanging upon a tree; for the curse which he was to redeem us from was the curse of the moral law, not of the judicial. It was not the curse of such a malefactor’s death before men, but before God; for from that curse were we to be redeemed, and therefore that curse was he made. And Gal. iii. 10, 13, we have it expressly thus: ‘The law says, Cursed is every one,’ &c. It is true that this hanging on a tree (on which judicial punishment a curse was pronounced) was made the figure of Christ’s being cursed with the curse of the moral law; but that was the curse which Christ was made, and therefore, Deut. xxi. 22, God beforehand typically accursing that death (as aiming at his Son), says of him that hangs on a tree, that he is accursed before him. So that his Son, whom this aimed at, was not only cursed before men, in that he was put to such an accursed death, but was also cursed before God with the curse of the moral law, whereof

the apostle brings this as the sign and proof, that that death which in the judicial law only was accursed, was executed upon him.

2. The curse of the moral law, spoken of ver. 10, is opposed to blessing; and as the blessings of God are the matter of his promises, so curses are the matter of his threatenings. Blessings are conveyed by promises, curses by threatenings. The threatenings of the law are the cannons, and the curses in them are the bullets. And as whom God blesseth, he blesseth with all blessings; so whom he curseth, he curseth with all cursings. As there is a fulness of blessings in the gospel (as Rom. xv. 29), so the moral law is full of all curses, which notwithstanding Christ underwent.

3. The curse contains in it the avenging wrath of God, and is more than a bare punishment from God. As God's favour is the life of all blessings, so God's avenging wrath gives weight to all curses. The saints are punished in anger, but not cursed in their chastisements, because they are inflicted on them out of love. But here we must warily distinguish between loving the person punished, and punishing that beloved person out of love. God, though he loved the person of Christ when he punished him, yet he punished him, not out of love, but wrath. When he punished the saints, he both punisheth persons beloved, and also out of love, which stirs up anger. But he punisheth Christ out of wrath, and therefore he was made a curse. His person was beloved, but he being made sin, to that end to bear the full punishment due to sin, God therefore out of wrath punisheth sin imputed to him. Not God's wrath, but an anger arising from love, is it that chastiseth us; but it is not so with Christ, the wrath of God was poured forth on him. Which yet differs from his punishing of wicked men, whose persons he hates, and whom he punisheth out of wrath also. But though he loves Christ's person, yet he punisheth sin in him out of pure wrath, and lets justice fly upon him to have its full pennyworths out of him; he lets wrath suck the blood of his soul, till it falls off, as the leech when it is filled, and breaks.

So that, put all these three considerations together, that Christ was made the curse of the law moral, not judicial only; that the curse thereof contains in it all curses; and that those curses are laid and set on with God's wrath; and this will be the doctrine; -

That the whole curse that our persons were subject unto from the law, Christ underwent to redeem us from it."⁴

If the Law brings only a curse, how can faith lift the curse? How can the blessing of Abraham be obtained? Paul returns again to the redeeming work of Christ (cf. 1:4; 3:1). It is Christ, not our faith, that saves and He does this by bearing the curse of the Law.

C. Christ the Redeemer

The term "redeemed" is from the word EXAGORAZO, commonly used in buying a slave's freedom (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; Revelation 5:9). He delivers us from the penalty of the broken law. "At issue here is satisfaction of violated justice, as is evident from the phrase: *from the curse of the law.*"⁵

D. Christ our Substitute

The method of redemption is substitution. He became a curse *for* us, that is, *in our stead*.

NOTE: There is in the Greek text, a graphic picture of what Christ has done as captured in Paul's use of prepositions. We were *under* (HUPO) a curse (cf. Romans 3:9, *under* sin). Christ purchased us *out from under* (EK HUPO) the curse of the law. He did this by becoming a curse *over* (HUPER) us and so

between us and the overhanging curse which fell on Him.⁶ That Christ became a curse is inferred from Deuteronomy 21:23.

CONCLUSION: Satan's agenda is to corrupt and distort the gospel and he has been very successful in getting Evangelicals to ignore the nature of the atonement. A shell game has taken place, and people have been duped into believing a gospel that H. Richard Niebuhr described as, "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."⁷ Niebuhr was describing Protestant liberals of the middle of the 20th century – but that description now applies to many self-proclaimed Evangelicals! The Lord Jesus became accursed for His people. He hung on the cross as a condemned criminal (Philippians 2:5-11). The cross emphasizes the curse of God, and so a curse becomes a blessing. Christ Jesus has secured the blessing of heaven to earth, and this includes justification (3:8), life (3:11) and the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 9:15). The last three words of 3:14 are emphatic. The blessing comes by faith alone, quite apart from the Law. The late Jim Boice lamented the shallow state of modern Evangelicalism, especially its very shallow way of evangelism. "Well, the weaknesses of our contemporary evangelism have been recognized and critiqued by many (David Wells, Os Guinness), all of whom have written things that have been helpful to me. As I have read their books, I have found that there is a common bottom line. Evangelism is to teach the Word of God. Not just a certain evangelistic core, or only certain doctrines, or only truths that will move or motivate the ungodly. It is to teach the Bible and to do this as carefully, consistently, and comprehensively as possible, while looking to God (and praying to God) to give new life. Gordon Clark expressed it by saying quite succinctly, 'Evangelism is the exposition of the Scripture. God will do the regenerating.' 'Just preach Jesus!' someone says. Did I hear, 'Just preach *Jesus*'? Let's do it. But remember what Jesus means. Jesus means 'Salvation is of the Lord,' the very words uttered by Jonah from the belly of the fish. To preach Jesus is to preach a Calvinistic gospel."⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ M. J. Glodo, "The Blessings and Cursings: Deuteronomy Chapter 28", *Tabletalk*, May 1995, p. 12.

² Moises Silva, *Interpreting Galatians: Explorations in Exegetical Method* (Baker, 2001), p. 231.

³ This section is adapted from Donald Guthrie, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 96.

⁴ *The Works of Thomas Goodwin V* (rpt. Tanski Publications, 1996, p. 188-189).

⁵ H. N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 126.

⁶ Cf. the excellent discussion by A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures In the New Testament IV* (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), p. 294.

⁷ H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Harper & Row, 1959), p. 193.

⁸ J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expositional Commentary III* (Baker, 1993), p. 1090.