

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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| Series: | Galatians | | Pastor/Teacher |
| Number: | 16 | | Gary L.W. Johnson |
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BLESSED OR CURSED?

“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 *cursed* 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. ***SALVATION BY FAITH: ARGUMENT FROM THE CASE OF ABRAHAM.*** The gospel that Paul preached was no innovation. The Galatians had been bewitched by the way the Judaizers appealed to the Old Testament Scriptures. Look at Abraham, says Paul. The apostle will spend the next two chapters focusing his attention on Abraham. “This is no mere incidental illustration,” notes Burton, “but fills a vital place in his argument. The fact itself suggests, what an examination of the argument confirms, that Paul is here replying to an argument of his opponents.”² This is the same problem that we met in Paul’s epistle to the Romans (4:9-12). By bringing in Abraham, Paul successfully trumped the Judaizers who had evidently appealed to Moses to substantiate their claims. Three things are emphasized about Abraham (cf. Genesis 15:1-6):

- A. *God made Abraham a promise.*
- B. *Abraham believed God.*
- C. *Abraham was declared righteous (justified).*

NOTE: The instrumentality of Abraham's justification was faith – works were not involved. Abraham was justified *before* circumcision (Genesis 15:6 and 17:9) on the basis of faith alone. This is the pattern that Paul is establishing – the Gentiles are justified in the same way that Abraham was. Blessings come through *believing* Abraham, not through circumcised Abraham. Justification, according to the Apostle Paul, is had by faith alone. William Bridge (1600-1671), asked: “But how shall I discern that I am a justified person? If you have been effectually called, by the Spirit of God working with the word, so as to convince you of sin, the great evil of it, as it is contrary to the holy nature of God, as well as destructive to the souls of men; and to turn you from the same, if you have seen a shortness in your own righteousness, and a fulness in Christ and his righteousness; and, by the work of the Spirit, your soul hath been drawn to Christ, as Jeremiah 31:3, *With loving-kindness have I drawn thee*; then you are a justified person. *And whom he called, them he also justified*, Rom. 8:30. If you have been brought by the Spirit's conviction, to renounce your own righteousness in point of justification, as Paul was, Phil. 3, and to rely on Christ's righteousness, by faith, for the justifying of your person before God, then you are justified. *And by him, all that believe, are justified from all things*, Acts 13:39. And if you have the same dispositions wrought in your heart, by the Holy Spirit, as those justified persons spoken of in the Scriptures had, then are you justified persons.”³

II. ***SALVATION BY FAITH: 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).*** 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.

1. The term “redeemed” is from the word *exagorazō*, 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.*”⁴
2. The method of redemption is *substitution*. He became a curse *for us*, that is *in our stead*. Thomas Schreiner points out, “Thankfully, Jesus removes the curse from

those who belong to him because he took their curse upon himself. He was cursed *for us* [*hyper hēmōn*] (3:13). We have a clear example here of substitution since Jesus took upon himself the curse that human beings deserved. Indeed, it is right to speak of penal substitution since he received the penalty (the curse) that sinners deserved. He died the death we should have died and, thereby, freed believers from the dominion of sin. We can rightly say that Christ's death is both substitutionary and an example of *Christian Victor*. It is substitutionary in that Christ died in the place of sinners and took the curse we deserved. On the other hand, the theme of *Christus Victor* is also present since the chains of slavery have been broken, and those redeemed are free. Through the cross, both the curse and the dominion of sin have been dethroned."⁵

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 hypo*) the curse of the law. He did this by becoming a curse *over* (*hyper*) us and so between us and the overhanging curse which fell on him. That Christ became a curse is inferred from Deuteronomy 21:23.⁶

CONCLUSION: I cited E. D. Burton earlier. He wrote a commentary on Galatians in the International Critical Commentary series. In many ways it is an impressive contribution. J. Gresham Machen reviewed it when it first appeared, saying, "Professor Burton's long-awaited commentary on Galatians is perhaps the most elaborate New Testament exegetical work that has appeared within the past thirty or forty years. The author declares in his preface that he began work on Galatians in 1896, and the finished product bears abundant testimony to the diligence with which the twenty-four intervening years up the appearance of the book were spent. Attainments in various fields, moreover, served to equip the author for his task; Professor Burton is a notable grammarian and lexicographer who had already – even before the appearance of this his most important work – placed students of the New Testament very deeply in his debt." Machen, however, went on to say, "Nevertheless, despite the many virtues of Professor Burton's great work, despite the gratitude which all students of the New Testament must feel toward the learned author, it must be confessed with sorrow that this most recent and most elaborate commentary marks distinctly a backward step in the history of New Testament exegesis. For the plain fact is that the method of grammatico-historical exegesis is here actually though not consciously abandoned. The author does not present to his readers the real Paul as he actually lived in the first century, but a strangely modernized Paul, who will subserve the interests of the current liberalism."⁷ One of the most glaring examples of Burton's defective theology is seen in his failure to see the vicarious aspect of the atonement in Galatians 3:13. Instead he dogmatically insists that the death of Christ was basically just a disclosure of God's attitude towards humanity, and not a penal substitution. Machen closed his analysis of Burton's work by declaring, "The Epistle to the Galatians, *the Magna Charta of Christian liberty*, has fallen again upon evil days. It had fallen upon evil days at the close of the middle ages. It was buried then under the Roman Catholic system of merits, and under the trivialities of mediaeval exegesis. And now again, in the pages of Professor Burton's commentary, it is buried under the neolegalistic slavery of the modern *liberal* Church. But the message of the Epistle is essentially plain, and cannot permanently be obscured."⁸

ENDNOTES

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

²E. DeWitt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary On the Epistle to the Galatians* (T&T Clark, 1977), p. 153.

³*The Works of William Bridge V* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1984), p. 399.

⁴H. N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Eerdmans, 1953), p. 126.

⁵T. R. Schreiner, *Christ Crucified: A Theology of Galatians* (Crossway, 2024), p. 53.

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

⁷*Machen's Notes on Galatians*, ed. J. Skilton, *On Biblical and Theological Studies* (P&R, 1973), p. 222.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 229.