

Under a Curse

Galatians 3:10-14

I hope that by now the main point of this book of Galatians is clear. I hope that question we have pondered the last couple weeks is understandable to you and that the correct answer is well established in your own mind. I hope that you fully grasp the reason for Paul's anguish for these people of Galatia.

Gal. 3:1 "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?...3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?"

A thousand times over, the answer is "no." Having begun by the Spirit, you as a Christian are also perfected by the Spirit. Having begun by the Spirit, you are completed by the power of the Holy Spirit within you. Not by the performance of your own works of obedience to the law. Because if you were, and here is where we move forward this afternoon, if you were perfected by your own effort and by your own work, you are under a curse.

And that is where we pick up today. We are blessed, with Abraham, by faith, for he was the man of faith. He believed God, by faith he believed God's covenant promise, and "it was counted to him as righteousness." He was declared to be righteous, righteousness was imputed to him, credited to him. By faith. He was justified by faith.

So what? That's a useful question. What difference does all of that that make for me and my life? The answer is this, that if you try to continue in the Christian life and make yourself acceptable to God by your own works of the law, you are under a curse. This morning, I not only want you to understand that and believe it, but I want you to gain a sense of feeling it. Feeling the

curse, or at least feeling what it would be like to be under it.
v.10a

You who rely on works of the in order to make yourself acceptable to God, you who rely on works of the law in order to earn or achieve a right standing with God, you are under this curse. It is,

I. THE CURSE OF PERFECT OBEDIENCE.

The covenant was established by God to include both blessings and curses. Rewards and punishment. We read of those curses as they are specified by the mouth of Moses on Mt. Ebal in Deuteronomy 27. It was a charge by the prophet to the people of Israel to obey the Lord their God when they entered the promised land. And the curses were pronounced upon all those who broke the terms of that covenant by disobeying God's law. The chapter ends,

Deut. 27:26 "Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them. And all the people shall say, Amen."

That's the verse Paul quotes in our text this afternoon. Deuteronomy 28 then defines the blessings of the covenant, and they were read on Mt. Gerizim.

Deut. 28:1 "And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. 2 And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God...13 And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, 14 and if you do not turn aside

from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them. 15 But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.”

So that’s pretty clear. But, of course, no one kept the covenant. No one obeyed the stipulations of the covenant. Everyone in Israel would become a covenant breaker, and that is why Jesus himself had to come to earth in order to perfectly fulfill those covenant duties. Jesus had to do it himself, so that by faith, we who deserved the curse might receive the blessing.

I want you to understand that reality, because only in that context do Paul’s words make sense. He writes to fallen people, to sinful people. It is not that God’s revealed will has changed, not that the law is no longer a definition of righteousness or our rule of life. But simply this, every one of his readers was already a covenant breaker. Every one of you is as well. Not one of us can claim to be without sin.

And you have to come to terms with that. God doesn’t grade on a curve. God doesn’t give partial scores that enable you to get a good grade in the class even if you aren’t perfect. The standard is pass/fail. It’s all or nothing. There are no shades of grey. No partial credit. Either you are righteous by the law or you are not. Either you have kept the law or you haven’t. And with that standard,

A. One breach of the law disqualifies you.

That’s the curse. That’s the slavery, the burden. It is a curse because it is impossible. If you depend upon the works of the law for your standing before God, there is no provision for blessing in the event break the law. If you rely upon works of the law, there is

no redemption when you fail. Just the curse. If you were to depend upon the works of law in order to define your relationship with God, then once that breach has taken place, you are without hope.

It is a simple and straightforward standard. Deuteronomy 27:26. “Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.” That’s the verse Paul quotes in our text today,
v.10

If law is the only standard, if the works of the law is your only basis for righteousness before God, then one breach of the law disqualifies you. If law is your standard for acceptance before God, if you “rely on works of the law” then there is no provision for the grace of God in the event of disobedience. If you live by the law, you will die by the law. There is no escape. No way to avoid the relentless demands of the entirety of the law.

Look carefully at verse 10, and let me note that when Paul quotes Deut. 27:26 there to prove his point, he translates the Hebrew verse into Greek with an emphasis that isn’t as clear in the Hebrew original from Deuteronomy. It isn’t that Paul translates the verse incorrectly, but he adds an emphasis for our benefit. He adds a word to make his point stand out, the word “all.” “Curse be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law.” “All things.” Everything. Every law. If law is to be your standard and foundation as you stand before God, then everything in the law is required of you. All things. Perfectly. That’s the curse, for you know you are already disqualified, and nothing you do according to law can atone for your previous law-breaking.

And, of course, that duty never ends. The curse of perfect

obedience is obvious, because...

B. Perfect, perpetual obedience is your unending duty and obligation.

So here's the problem. Here's the curse. If you rely on works of law, one breach and your done. And then to make the burden even worse, much worse, you are not allowed a single breach into the future. That's why Paul continues,

v.11

That's a quote from Habakkuk 2:4, which Paul also quotes in the book of Romans.

Rom. 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, The righteous shall live by faith."

The biblical doctrine is that the righteousness of God is ours by faith. Righteousness before God is something we have by faith. And thus, the one who is justified, by faith, lives by that same faith. The just shall live by faith, the emphasis actually on the word "lives." He lives by faith, not by works.

So just as faith is the ground of your justification, so it is the basis upon which you continue to live. You didn't start out with God on the basis of faith and then switch over to the principle of law in order to be "perfected by the flesh." The just shall live by faith.

To the contrary, look at,
v.12

In other words, the one who uses the law in order to rightly

stand before God "shall live by them," he shall live by the law. More pointedly, and more clearer, that would mean, "he must live by the law." Every law. All the law. Perfectly. Perpetually. An unending duty and obligation.

Suppose I were to say to one my children, "I love you. I will be a father to you and love you as my daughter." But suppose, then, I added this: "In order to remain my daughter, you must obey me perfectly. Your position in this family depends upon your perfect, perpetual obedience to me. You must preserve your place within the family by means of law, and therefore any violation of that law will invalidate your status in the family."

What would you think of me if I said that? What would I think of you if you said that to one of your children? Or said that to you as your pastor? What would you think of me? Not very much. Because our children would no longer really be our children. They would be slaves, working to preserve their family position by the burden of having to perform. They would be servants, like players on a baseball team who fall to hit .200, or a home run hitter who strikes out all the time. A salesman who doesn't meet his quota. You don't perform, and your fired. That's the principle of law.

That's the burden of law. You can never escape the necessity of fulfilling your duty perfectly. You can never free yourself from the curse of the obligation to perform adequately in order to keep your job. That's the meaning of verse 12. Two diametrically opposite principles are at work: law and faith. Law means your performance determines the outcome, and before God, only a perfect performance is sufficient. A perfect, perpetual, unending performance. That's the curse.

Sometimes, sadly, children are raised to think or feel as if they

are actually under that curse. It is the curse of overbearing parents, legalistic parents, parents who communicate to their children, “I won’t love you unless you perform, unless you fulfill this requirement of the law.” I won’t love you until your perform good enough, and sadly, in that context, seldom is “good enough” ever achieved. No effort is ever good enough, and exasperation quickly sets in. And rebellion.

That’s the curse of perfect obedience.

I ought to say at this point, that was the arrangement in the Garden of Eden, in the covenant of works. Adam and Eve enjoyed life, perfect communion and fellowship with God. But they were required to obey in order to preserve their life, and if they were to disobey the curse would be death. For them, however, it was very different. They weren’t yet sinful, and they had no need for atonement for sins past. They were still innocent and had the ability not to sin. They had life, and only needed to obey in order to preserve that life. But they fell. They broke the covenant and were justly condemned to endure the curse that is described here.

With that in mind beloved, let me emphasize that the whole point of the gospel is that we are no longer related to God in a covenant of works but in a covenant of grace. In that new covenant, the covenant of grace, there is still hope of blessing even when we deserve the curse. There is always a hope of blessing, in Christ. And that is Paul’s point. After all, just look at verse 13.

So this whole concept of the curse isn’t irrelevant at all. The whole idea of the curse isn’t done away with. In fact, just the opposite. We see,

II. THE CURSE APPLIED.

If you rely on works of the law you are under a curse. And that is exactly what Jesus did.

A. Jesus suffered the curse of the law for us.

He became a curse for us. And Paul again quotes the Old Testament,
v.13

It seems like a relatively unimportant Old Testament law, just one particular example within a specific case study,

Deut. 21:22 “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”

As secondary as that regulation might be, the principle is crucial. The concept of the curse is crucial. And to be cursed by God was a terrible thing. A man hanged bore a special curse as the victim of God’s perfect justice. Cursed with the fullness of God’s wrath and condemnation. Judged with eternal judgment. Not just death, but the cursed death of hanging, the cursed death of the cross. That’s why Paul would write to the Philippians 2, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Jesus endured the curse. He himself satisfied the perfect demands of the law, without a single disqualifying breach, without sin. He satisfied the demands of perfect and perpetual obedience. He finished the work of redemption with his perfect obedience. And even more than that, he then substituted himself as the object of the curse in order to redeem those who were rightly under the curse.

2 Cor. 5:18 “All this is from God, who through Christ

reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 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.”

So the very message of the gospel is wrapped up in this idea of a curse. Jesus wasn't simply a good example to follow. He wasn't simply a martyr. He was cursed. He became sin. He took upon himself our sin and made himself a sin offering. “So that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Not by the works of the law, you see, but by faith. He became the curse so that we could become righteous.

And you might ever be tempted to think to yourself, what difference does that make, then look with me at,

Rom. 8:1 “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

God condemned sin. Jesus suffered the curse of the law for us. And the result of that? “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” In judicial language, that is the most important promise of the whole Bible. No condemnation. No curse. In Christ, there is blessing, despite our sin. Because of what Jesus did and what Jesus

accomplished. And note how Paul says it, “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.”

How? By faith, not by works. According to the Spirit, not according to the flesh.

The curse is applied to Jesus, and therefore the blessing is applied to us. For us, for us who believe in Jesus, that means,

B. Blessing instead of curse.

v.14

What a blessing was promised to Abraham. The blessing of justification. The blessing of life. The blessing of identity, of being the children of God, the people of God. It is the blessing of being freed from this curse we have been identifying all morning. The blessing of being freed from the curse of having to perform with perfect obedience. The blessing of being freed from the unending duty and obligation of perfect, perpetual obedience. The blessing of redemption. The blessing of the forgiveness of sins. The blessing of justification. The blessing of salvation. The blessing of being called the children of God. The blessing of an inheritance, being joint-heirs with Jesus. The blessing of the freedom to call upon God as Abba, Father.

Look ahead just a bit in Galatians.

Gal. 4:1-7

Beloved, that's the blessing. You will never achieve that blessing, you will never receive that blessing, if you rely upon the works of law. To put that positively, you will obtain that blessing if, by faith, you believe in Jesus and trust in him to do the very thing you have failed to do. You will receive that blessing if, by faith in Jesus, you believe that he died for your sins, that he was cursed

as the punishment your sins deserved.

And if you believe that, if that is your faith this afternoon, if you would wish to be freed from this curse, then let me again draw you back to that penetrating question which began this chapter,

v.1-3

No, beloved. The answer, a thousand times, the answer is no. You are not being made perfect by the flesh, “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse.”