

God's curse' (Deut 21:23). There is no doubt that Paul was purposefully using quotes from Moses, the author and mediator of the law and champion of the Judaisers who were disturbing the Galatian churches; Paul was using words from 'the Law' to destroy the arguments of those who were using it inappropriately! You can look at this passage from Deuteronomy and say that it has little to do with Christ and his death, but circumstantially, we must acknowledge that both 'curse' and 'dying on a tree' are not mentioned very often in Scripture and here they occur together. Their occurrence in this verse leaves it open for use by Paul to declare that the words of Moses prophetically foreshadowed the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross!

Application

Christians today live with the precious knowledge that they have access to the Father through Jesus Christ, at the price of His death on our behalf. On the one hand, the consequence of our redemption is that we have great liberty, and God can use this by His Spirit to do great works for the Kingdom of God through us, who without faith, would be condemned as sinners. On the other hand, we are left with a sense of great debt, because Jesus has done so much for us. Surely we must yield everything to Him who has given everything for us! In addition, we may respond to the amazing work of God through Jesus Christ, by seeking to honour God through everything we do, hoping to reflect something of His holiness and sacrifice within every part of our lives, as a testimony to what He has done for us.

These are some of the admirable motives for Christian work and worship within the life of God's church today. However, it does not take much to find that despite Paul's rigorous defeat of the idea of religious legalism, there is something about 'keeping to laws' which still persists in human nature within the church. Although we no longer argue about the laws of Moses, churches still argue about rules and regulations to do with religious practice, and the intensity of some of these arguments would put a Pharisee to shame! One reason for this may be that Satan loves to repeat the sins of past generations on present generations, in such a way that they do not recognise what they are doing, and I would love to say that God's people were watching to guard against such sin. But they are not. Most Christians today have little knowledge of the past and are wide open to Satan's temptations to create churches which forever split over trivial issues, for example, and often set down rules about church practice, especially unspoken ones, which dominate the worship and service of God's people.

Let us not replace one set of laws with another! Let us rejoice in our spiritual freedom, our redemption and our organic, natural unity in Christ Jesus. Let us try out what it means to have complete faith and trust in Jesus Christ our Lord, and live by the work of the Spirit of God within us! We are justified by faith; not by the church, or the law, or any Christian leader, or by any version of the Bible, or any bandwagon or movement within the church today. Let us have confidence in that faith.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What part does the law of the Old Testament have in the life of God's people today?
2. Discuss in your group how faith in Jesus Christ can place you in a right relationship with God. Each one of you comment in turn.
3. If Jesus was 'cursed on the tree' (3:13), how did God remove that curse, and how do we know it?

Discipleship

This passage of scripture is one which truly celebrates the work of Jesus Christ in winning salvation for us. Use this passage as an aid to write a prayer of praise and thanks to God for the love of Jesus Christ which took away the curse of sin on the Cross, for all people who wish to find salvation through Him, for all time. Use the prayer yourself for a few days; change it if you feel it helpful, until you have a form of it with which you are satisfied.

Final Prayer

Give us humility, Almighty Father, in the face of the great truths of the Gospel. May we handle them with dignity and care, and always remember that we are dependent upon You for everything, including our wisdom and understanding. Guide us in all truth, Almighty Father; AMEN

Prayer

We praise You, Lord Jesus, for we rely on Your care. When we feel down, our spirits yearn for the security of Your love; when we are troubled, we have no rest until our problems are safe in Your hands; and when we are distraught, our feelings are broken until they are healed by Your touch. Save us, Lord Jesus, so that we may not be overcome by this world, but live a life of victory in the power of Your love! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Troubles

Pray and ask the Lord to help you gain some focus on those things which you see as problems or troubles in your life. It may be that with the help of the Lord, they can be turned around to become 'positives' in your life again, instead of 'negatives'. It is always helpful if we attempt to redeem situations with the help of the Lord, before we regard them as completely lost.

Meditation

Why not try? Why not live a life of faith
And find out if your soul is really free?

Why not see if faith will hold you up when others fall?
If 'God is love' means something real when life is tough?

Why not help the poor unstintingly, and suffer for it,
Not feeling pain for doing wrong, but doing what is right?

Why not pray when all seems irredeemably lost;
And find out if the Saviour really saves the perishing?

Why not tread the impossibly narrow path of Christ?
Friends will think you foolish; God will think you wise!

Why not open up your heart to the Spirit's wind;
Set free to be the man or woman God has made you?

Why not take the plunge and be baptised in Christ;
Die with Him, and in His time, be raised again in glory?

Bible Study - Galatians 3:10-14

¹⁰ For all who depend on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe all the things written in the book of the law, and do them.' ¹¹ Since it is plain that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.' ¹² But the law does not rest on faith, rather, 'The one who does the works of the law will live by them.' ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,' ¹⁴ so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, and so that through faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Review

In this important passage of Scripture, Paul explains in a very condensed way how people are saved and brought into a relationship with God which is right and just. Most of what Paul says is well known to us; for example 'no-one is justified before God by the Law ... for the one who is righteous will live by faith' (3:11). He also talks about Jesus' death on the tree as a curse which He bore for us (3:13), and he describes the way that 'the blessing of Abraham' is made available to Gentiles 'in Christ Jesus' and sealed by the 'promise of the Spirit' (3:14). Most Christians would feel happy to have grasped Paul's general explanation of salvation and to have spotted the various quotes from the Old Testament which are used by Paul to back this up. But there is more beneath the surface.

The starting point for a deeper understanding of this passage and its great spiritual truths will come from an attempt to picture the circumstances under which this letter was written. We will certainly appreciate more of what he was trying to say if we understand that Paul shaped what he said to try and persuade his readers about the Gospel. Imagine you are writing to a friend about something controversial and you are trying to bring about a genuine change of mind. You would not just state blandly what you believe to be true for fear it would be rejected out of hand, so you would try to write in a way which explained your stance and why it was different from that of your friend, and therefore attempt to 'win' the argument. This is the style of this part of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

We know something about what the Judaisers in the church at Galatia thought because of other first century writings and other New Testament books. Obviously, they believed that people could only find a right relationship with God if they kept the laws given through Moses. However, they would have been rather annoyed at Paul's insistence that what happened to Abraham was more important than Moses (3:6-9). Abraham was the 'Father of the Nation', but surely the greater revelation of God came later through Moses? In addition, most Jews accepted that they were unable to keep the law perfectly, but they believed that the sacrificial system gave them a perfectly adequate way to restore peace with God, and if all else failed, they thought that their circumcision meant that they were connected spiritually and physically to their forefather Abraham, who had been saved by God's Covenant promises (Gen 15:1-6 and ch17). These were the strong arguments of the Judaisers which we easily forget today.

To argue against this, Paul turned to what was written about the law by Moses Himself, who said; 'cursed be anyone who does not uphold ... the law' (Deut 27:26 – see Paul's paraphrase in 3:10). He insisted that the problem with the Judaisers' position was that the law, however helpful it might be as a definition of what was right and wrong, could not make people right with God (3:11). Paul knew that the people he was writing to did call themselves 'Christians', even though many had added Judaism to their faith, so he now appealed to Jesus as the true source of faith. He explained that the great truth and mystery of salvation was that Jesus Christ had taken the full force of the curse of the law on our behalf so that men and women might not have to pay its price (3:13). Everyone and anyone could receive the blessing of a right relationship with God by means of faith in Jesus (3:14), and therefore receive the Spirit of God as the guarantee of that blessing!

In order to bridge the gap between himself and the Judaisers, you will see that towards the end of the passage, Paul did indeed accept that the blessing of a right relationship with God could indeed be found (by Jews) through Abraham (3:14), but it was only generally available to Gentiles 'in Christ Jesus', not 'in Abraham'. This was his point.

Going Deeper

There is no doubt that this passage is one which has had a huge influence on Christian thought and theology, and it deserves our attention for that reason alone; it is the basis of a great deal of Paul's theological thought about salvation. However, much of what Paul says comes from his analysis of the 'curse' of the law in the Old Testament, and Paul says that it was this curse which Christ removed on the Cross (3:13) to achieve our salvation. Going deeper, we will have to look at the subject of 'curses', and how this helps us understand salvation.

The curse of the law

The Judaisers did indeed have an argument when they said that the laws of Moses were a revelation of God. Elsewhere in his writings, Paul accepted that the law had a purpose, but he would only accept that its purpose was to expose wrongdoing (see Romans 5:20, 8:4, 1 Cor 15:56 etc.), and because sin and wrongdoing was endemic within fallen humanity, he argued that it was simply impossible for anyone to keep God's law perfectly and therefore be justified. Some rabbi's in Paul's own day accepted this very point, but said (as we have seen above) that the sacrificial system and circumcision were designed by God to ensure that God's Covenant people, the Jews, could be saved. This reasoning was responsible for the idea that Gentiles had to become circumcised. If they did, so the argument went, they could benefit from the Covenant blessings and salvation found in Abraham!

Paul knew all this, but he insisted that salvation for Jew or Gentiles was through Christ alone. In order to dispense with the rabbi's proposition, Paul needed to make an argument against the law which did not include Abraham, and he chose to focus on the 'curse' of the law found in Deuteronomy 27:26. At this point in Deuteronomy, Moses issued instructions to the Israelites

about what they should do when they entered the Promise Land. As a form of 'Covenant Renewal', Moses told the people of Israel to mount a set of stones on Mounts Ebal and Gerazim, two large hilltops near to the later city of Samaria. On Ebal, the stones were to have curses written on them against those who disobeyed the law (Deut 27). On Gerazim, the stones were to have blessings written on them for people who kept the law (Deut 28:1-7). If you read this whole passage of Deuteronomy, however, you will discover that by far the majority of it is about Moses' concern that the people of Israel would not keep the law or the Covenant and would come under curse and condemnation as a consequence (Deut 28:15-68). The one sentence which captures this pessimism on the part of Moses just before he died is quoted by Paul here in this passage, in verse 10; 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe all the things written in the book of the law, and do them.' This is almost word for word the same as Deuteronomy 27:26, but Paul has added the word 'all'. Both Moses and Paul, in different ways, demanded that the law had to be kept in every way if it was to be effective; any failure to keep any part of the law by those to whom it was given, meant failure.

Although Paul's argument that Abraham's faith came before the law (see yesterday's passage) is well known, this argument was in fact more effective. Someone only had to break one small part of the law, and they had, in effect, broken it all; and Paul was able to say that this was no less than the general opinion of Moses!

'The righteous will live by faith!'

Paul now had to find a passage of scripture which justified his understanding of the connection between faith in Jesus Christ and being placed in a right relationship with God. He found it in Habakkuk 2:4, which reads; 'but the righteous live by their faith'. The prophet Habakkuk spoke at the time of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem when the people of Israel were probably at their lowest point, and it was commonly recognised that the great dynasty of David in Jerusalem had fallen because of centuries of sin on the part of the people of Israel and its rulers in Jerusalem. Habakkuk's cry was that of a just man seeking to find answers to the terrible catastrophe which had befallen Israel and Judah, and in that brief moment, amidst the prophet's gloom at the terrible things happening all around him, he had a momentary vision of God's solution to the eternal problem of sin and lawlessness, even amongst God's people. The answer was 'faith'.

Paul uses this quote from Habakkuk in his famous definition of salvation in Romans 1:17; 'for in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written; "the one who is righteous will live by faith"; and the same passage is also quoted by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (10:38). What is interesting, however, is that Paul does not present this quote as some kind of 'proof text' to make his point here in Galatians. Rather, it makes the point for him about faith, which he then goes on to explain, by talking about what Jesus has done for us on the Cross. Faith, for Paul, was not just some abstract attitude or hope about God; it was about the human response to a historical event; the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. In addition, faith was a spiritual response, not a physical activity such as 'doing what the law requires' (3:12). Human activity had been found wanting as a means of coming close to God.

The curse of 'one who hangs on a tree'

Paul spoke out boldly; 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.' (3:13). Whilst most of what Paul had discussed up to this point was not new to theologians of Paul's day, this statement was. This is Paul's explanation of how Jesus managed to do the work of salvation; he did it by taking on himself the curse which should have been ours, and in so doing, He has set us free!

There are two parts to this great explanation of faith. Firstly, Paul used the idea of redemption which has a long pedigree within the Old Testament. For example, Isaac's life (upon whom the future of all God's people depended) was redeemed by the offering of a lamb on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:13,14), and God's work of saving the people of Israel from Egypt required an act of 'redemption' by which the life of animals (lambs) were exchanged for the life of the people of Israel on the night the Angel of Death travelled through Egypt (Ex 12:29-32). Paul does not talk about Jesus as a lamb 'who takes away the sins of the world' as does John in his Gospel (John 1:29f.), but the sense of this is here in this passage. Jesus died as a sacrifice on behalf of us and for our sins.

Secondly, Paul confirmed that the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross for the redemption of all people was scriptural, by quoting again from Deuteronomy; 'anyone hung on a tree is under