

Introduction

Upwards of seventy times in the New Testament we come across a significant 3-word phrase. The phrase points back to what had been inscribed by the Old Testament writers. The phrase is “it is written.” Jesus and the devil went back and forth with this phrase during the time of Christ’s temptation in the wilderness. To use the phrase is to cite a statement from what we now refer to as the Old Testament. But it was a phrase that pointed to the total truthfulness and authority of the scripture—that it was breathed out by God and therefore is foundational to what must be believed and what is true. As we read the text this morning we will see that phrase twice, and a third time it is implied. It is an indication that Paul, as we saw last time, is continuing to mount an argument based on the solid foundation of the authoritative word of God.

[Read text and Pray]

False teachers had come to the young churches in Galatia. They brought to them a distortion of the true gospel. They were asserting that the work of Christ was not enough. These believers also needed to follow the law, and of particular emphasis, they needed to be circumcised in order to be fully right with God. Paul wrote this letter to them in an endeavor to lead his converts to reject the distortion of the gospel that they had been hearing. He is educating them and providing the evidence necessary to reach the conclusion that what they were hearing is actually not the gospel at all but a perversion of it, which has no hope of delivering what was being promised.

The evidence Paul has set before them thus far consists of his own calling and reception of the gospel. There was the fact that he was called as an apostle by Christ himself. In addition, Christ personally revealed to him the details of the gospel. So, Paul’s reception and understanding of the gospel were independent of the Jerusalem apostles, but they affirmed him in what he preached. Later, Paul had successfully stood for the integrity of the gospel in opposition to Peter.

The next plank of evidence was the experience of the Galatians themselves when Paul came to them. The way in which the Galatians had embraced Christ and received the Spirit was not by works of the law but by hearing with faith.

Beginning with Galatians 3 and verse 9, Paul turns to his third plank of evidence, the inspired writings, to set forth straightforwardly the testimony of scripture. First, he turns to the example of Abraham, the forefather of the faithful. The scripture testifies that Abraham was counted righteous not by any work of the law but through faith. The scripture also testifies that God would likewise justify even Gentiles through faith.

This morning we remain within the category of the third plank of evidence for justification by faith alone—scriptural proof. Paul moves from what we learn specifically from Abraham to the scriptural principles of justification. He looks to the scripture for its witness to the basic truths which pertain to justification in order to present a solid case of evidence. In Galatians 3:10-14, Paul is doing systematic theology under four headings. These headings are four fundamental truths of the gospel. Let me list them by way of overview. We have 1) the curse’s universality, 2) the law’s inability, 3) Christ’s sufficiency, 4) faith’s exclusivity—curse, law, Christ, and faith.

I. The Curse’s Universality.

Under each of these headings, Paul has a point to assert. With the first three he presents scripture references as proof. In verse 10, Paul's point is that "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse." He makes this assertion on the basis of the scripture. "For it is written," he says. It is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." This text is Deuteronomy 27:26. In that context the Lord promised the Israelites blessing for their obedience to his law. He also warned of a curse for their failure to obey. All manner of blessing would be upon the people if they would keep the law of the Lord. However, all manner of curses would be on the people if they would not keep all the law of the Lord.

Paul, here in Galatians 3, brings us face-to-face with the same two outcomes—either blessing or cursing. Look back to Galatians 3:8. The gospel that was preached to Abraham was that in him all the nations would be BLESSED. Paul's conclusion in verse 9, then, was that those who are OF FAITH are BLESSED along with Abraham, the man of faith. Having established that the blessing of God is upon those who are of faith, Paul now wants his readers to see that the scripture demonstrates that the consequences of adding works of the law is catastrophic. That is because when you descend to the level of trying to keep the law to be fully right with God, there are dire consequences. The consequences are the opposite of blessing. Rather, those who rely on works of the law to any degree are under a curse.

God uttered curses of judgment to the serpent and to Adam and Eve in the aftermath of their repudiation of his one law in the Garden of Eden. To the serpent he declared, "Cursed are you because you have done this." To the man he said, "cursed is the ground because of you." A curse is the opposite of blessing. On the human level to utter a curse is to express a wish for calamity to come upon someone. From God's point of view, however, to curse is to enact judgment and condemnation along with the catastrophic consequences pertaining to them. To be under a curse is to be under judgment and its consequences. It is like John 3:18 says, "Whoever does not believe [in God's Son] is condemned already." There is condemnation already resting on whomever is under the divine curse.

Now, who is it that is under this curse? I want you to take note of the terms that express universal extent in this text. When I first looked at the verse this week, four words in this 10th verse just jumped off the page at me—all, everyone, abide, all. ALL who rely on works are under a curse. Cursed be EVERYONE. Who does not ABIDE. By ALL things written in the Book of the Law.

This is a strong emphasis on universality. All who rely on works of the law. There are no exceptions. It is a universal fact: Anyone who relies on the law is included here. Everyone who depends on their works is the subject of this sentence. There are no if's and's or but's. If you rely on the law, you are under a curse.

The reason why all who rely on the law are under a curse is because the curse is on everyone who does not keep the law. The law itself is universal. It is all-encompassing. So, all one has to do not to keep the law is to break it even just once. See that! Cursed be EVERYONE who does not ABIDE. That is to stay with it. What you have to do to keep the law is to abide by it and do it. That implies at all times, in all ways, with constancy, and no let up. And then there is that little but highly significant word again, ALL. Abide by ALL things written in the Book of the Law. In order to be perfect and be blessed by keeping the law, a person must ABIDE by and DO ALL that is written in the law—not a few of things written, not some of the things written, not even most of the things written but ALL things—100% of the things written. So it is that James (2:11) says, "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it."

So the demand of the law is universal. To truly keep it, you must do it completely. Perfect obedience is the requirement. And the curse of the law is universal. All who rely on works of the law are under a curse. Why? Because no one except Jesus has kept God's law this way. All we have to do is read the commandments of the law. And one-by-one we will have to admit we have broken it not merely in one aspect but over and over and over again. Ever told a lie? Ever looked with lust? Ever taken something that was not yours? Ever murdered someone even with your angry thoughts? Ever wanted what belongs to another? Ever dishonored your parents? Ever failed to love and worship God with your whole heart?

But lest there be any doubt, Paul declares unequivocally in Romans 3:23 that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." In Romans 3:9-12, Paul highlights and stresses the universality of human sinfulness by quoting a string of verses from the Old Testament. He writes, "ALL, both Jews and Greeks are under sin, as it is written: None is righteous, no, NOT ONE; NO ONE understands; NO ONE seeks for God. ALL have turned aside; together they have become worthless; NO ONE does good, NOT EVEN ONE."

The fact is everyone is born relying on works of the law. It is our default position. By nature and on our own we have nothing else to rely on.

So we have the first of four fundamental gospel truths. Those who don't do everything the law requires are cursed. No one does everything required by the law. Therefore, everyone who is depending on works of the law for right standing with God is cursed. Jesus is the only exception to the fact that no one is not under the curse; we are all children of wrath. And that means me and it means you. It is easy for us to see the sin of others. And we are prone to deny our own. But the fact is that each of us, on our own, is wicked and each under God's curse. The first gospel truth is bad news. Not only do we fail to keep all the law, we fail to truly keep it at all. Our righteousness is filthy rags. We must know this bad news and acknowledge it to be true in order for the good news to even make sense. We have to know the danger of our terrible predicament in order to have any hope of getting out of it.

But before we get to the good news, Paul sets forth a second item of bad news.

II. The Law's Inability.

We are in verses 11 and 12 now of Galatians 3. Again, Paul has a point and he demonstrates his point to be what the scripture teaches. He cites two substantiating texts here. Paul's point in verses 11-12 is the second fundamental gospel truth of this paragraph. The first one is that the curse is universal. Everyone who relies on the law is under a curse. Now for the second: the law is of no help. Paul states, "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law."

This statement is still bad news, but there is an inkling of hope. Keeping the law cannot remove the curse. However, justification is a possibility. Remember, justification is not our proving we are righteous but God declaring us righteous. Paul's mention of the word justification provides the hope that it is possible. But he wants us to know that right standing before Holy God cannot be obtained through the law: "No one is justified before God by the law." The law is incapable of being a means by which anyone attains right standing with God.

The first scripture proof is Habakkuk 2:4 which straightforwardly states that "the righteous shall live by faith." The Old Testament prophet with the funny name, Habakkuk, brought a message to the people that they should always trust in the Lord. Even in the worst of times, they should be looking to him and resting in his goodness. And in the fourth verse of chapter 2, the Lord is speaking through him to say that life itself comes not by pride in self but by trust in God. The life he is talking

about is eternal life involving right standing before God. It is like unto the emphasis of John in the New Testament who promises that those who believe in the Son of God will not perish but have eternal life. The words through the prophet demonstrate that those who are considered righteous are those who live in right standing before God by faith.

The law, however, as Paul states, is not of faith. For proof, Paul turns to a second scripture reference on this point. It is Leviticus 18:5. "If a person does them, he shall live by them." This verse demonstrates that the law is not of faith; it consists in works, in doing, not trusting. And again, what does the law require? It requires perfect obedience. So all the law-keeping one does cannot undo all the law-breaking one has already done. Such an attempt is based on human performance. And it fails. Depending on the law, depending on a person's own works for right standing with God, flies in the face of the teaching of scripture. Scripture declares and demonstrates that no one will be justified through their works. Moreover, to attempt to do so exhibits a great fallacy. It is the fallacy of an attempt to do the impossible. People who have already broken God's commands think they can gain right standing by trying to keep some of his commandments when the law's requirement is complete and perfection obedience.

A look at the law of God leaves the honest and reasonable person at a point of complete despair. It cannot take the curse away. The law can only confirm God's righteousness in condemning the sinner who dares to try being right with God on the basis of his attempt to keep it.

We turn next to fundamental truth #3.

III. Christ's Sufficiency.

Everyone of us is under a curse due to the fact that we have broken God's law. And God's law is incapable of helping us become right with him. But there is hope! Paul's point in verse 13 is the jaw-dropping fact that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." The scripture reference to demonstrate this theological point is Deuteronomy 21:23. The text instructs God's people concerning a person who has committed a crime punishable by death and is hung on a tree. His body was not to be allowed to hang on the tree overnight, it was to be buried the same day, "for a hanged man is cursed by God."

It is crucial to the death that Jesus died not merely that he was put to death but that he was crucified. Crucifixion involved being hung on a cross of wood, in effect being hung on a tree. From the standpoint of the scripture, to hang on a tree as a death-rendering punitive measure for crime is to be cursed. Paul had just reminded the Galatians, "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed AS CRUCIFIED." Jesus died on a CROSS. He was hung on a TREE. Peter declares that Jesus "himself bore our sins in his body on the TREE." So here is Paul's flow of reasoning. Jesus was hanged on a tree. Everyone who is hanged on a tree is cursed. Therefore, Christ was cursed. He became a curse for us. Thus we (who believe in him) were redeemed (we were delivered) from the curse of the law. What the law could not do, Christ has done.

To hang on a cross was a shameful thing. It would have been unimaginable to the Jewish mind that the promised Messiah would be subjected to such an ignominious outcome. Certainly, there is no way God would allow Messiah to be crucified. It would surely be a failure of purpose not a success! Messiah surely could not rise to his place of rule and authority by being subjected to public scandal and death!

However, he was not cursed for his failure to keep the law. Unlike every other person in all the world for all of history, Jesus alone DID abide by the law of God in every respect. He kept it and

rendered complete obedience to every single one its stipulations. Jesus did not bear the curse for his sin. Rather, he was cursed FOR US—in our place. Like Isaiah says, “he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities.” The curse of God for the sins of others fell on Jesus. This is precisely how Messiah frees his people. The freedom he came to bring was not merely freedom from other oppressive nations tyrannizing them. No, as much as anything and most fundamentally, Jesus redeemed his people from the curse of sin. And he did it by taking their place and bearing their curse for them.

While there is no hope whatsoever for right standing before God through works of the law, human beings are not without hope. The curse that belongs to each one of us can be avoided. Christ suffered God’s curse as a substitute for those who identify with him.

And that brings us to Fundamental Truth #4.

IV. Faith’s Exclusivity.

Paul’s final point which rounds out his biblical argument against the distorted gospel of the Judaizers comes in verse 14: “so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” Paul does not supply a supporting Scripture in this verse. But he has already supplied all the supporting scripture that is needed. Abraham had been told—Genesis 12:3—that “in you shall all the nations be blessed.” It was said of Abraham—Genesis 15:6—“Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Paul had just concluded that “those who are of faith, are blessed with Abraham, the man of faith.” So then having pointed to Christ as the curse-bearer, Paul asserts that the blessing of Abraham promised to the nations comes even to the Gentiles in Christ with the promised blessing received by faith. The blessings that are received are all the blessings of belonging to the kingdom of God which is the family of Abraham and those who like him are justified through faith. Part of that blessing is the Spirit of God himself. As it was experienced by the Galatians, the Spirit comes to indwell us not because of works of the law, but he is a gift received by faith.

Here is the exclusivity of faith. There is NO OTHER WAY a person may be justified before God except through faith that rests on what Jesus Christ has accomplished. One of those five bedrock truths that underscored the Reformation is Sola Fide—faith alone.

Martin Luther wrote in his ground-breaking commentary on Galatians:

“Trying to be justified by the Law is like counting money out of an empty purse, eating and drinking from an empty dish and cup, looking for strength and riches where there is nothing but weakness and poverty, laying a burden on someone who is already oppressed to the point of collapse, trying to spend a hundred gold pieces and not having even a pittance.”

It is hopeless, useless, and fruitless to think you can do anything to secure right standing with God. But have you been convinced otherwise? Paul was once convinced. He was giving it all he could. But he came to realize that his best left him condemned before God. So he gave it all up, instead, to prize the righteousness of Christ received by faith. That can be you today. Just turn from hoping in yourself. Receive by faith God’s gift of right standing. Receive from Him eternal life through faith.

All who are resting by faith in the finished work of Christ should rejoice afresh and anew that we lawbreakers have been redeemed from the curse of law-breaking. What we could not and what the law could not do, God did sending his only Son and condemning him in the place of sinners, he has provided our redemption. He has granted us deliverance from the curse. We dare not corrupt the faith we profess by somehow, even to the smallest extent, depending on our works. Praise God for

His great mercy on us. And thank the Lord Jesus for his endurance of the curse on our behalf. How blessed we are to know and believe these glorious truths!

Conclusion

This morning's text is a precious treasure. It sets forth the foundational gospel truths everyone in the world needs to hear and know. Brothers and sisters, we are Christ's ambassadors to the world. We are called upon and given the privilege to share this gospel message with the world. The curse—everybody is under it. The law—nobody can be helped by it. Christ—he was cursed in the place of sinners. And Faith—it is the only saving response to what Christ has done. The redemption and the gifts that appertain to it are received by whoever will simply and truly believe.

Tell our family, friends, and neighbors. Support those who will go to unfamiliar places to tell those who have never heard. But, we also need to tell it to ourselves every day. Reminding us of God's standard of perfect obedience, we should bear in mind that no matter how far we have come in the sanctification process, in ourselves we have no reason for arrogance or a judgmental spirit toward others. We should each see ourselves as Paul saw himself—the chief of sinners.

Yet at the same time, the gospel is our source of hope about who we are. Christ became our curse for us. And by faith God does not see us in our sin. He looks upon Christ and sees us as righteous in him. In him, there is therefore now no condemnation.