

# Rediscovering the Cross - Part 5

## “Cursed”

Text: Galatians 3:10-13

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on April 7, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** This morning I have no story to begin my message. I have no illustration. I have no thought-provoking question. In fact, all the ways in which I have been taught how to preach seem completely inadequate before this scripture teaching about what Jesus did on the cross.
  - There are many subjects we study that are like swimming pools. With a bit of skill, we can swim from one side to the other. With a bachelor’s degree or Master’s degree, we can swim close to the bottom. After many decades of study, you can sit at the edge of your pool of study with a self-contented feeling and say, **“I have become pretty wise.”**
    - But when we come to study what happened at the cross, we find ourselves swimming in a pool so wide and so deep that after decades of study we say with Job, **“I am but of yesterday and know nothing.”**
- In one sense the cross is easily understood. A child can understand that at the cross Christ died for our sins. But in another sense the greatest Bible scholar has only begun to understand it.
  - On the one hand we cry out in childlike wonder, **“I once was blind, but now I see.”** And yet on the other hand we say with Paul, **“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror...now I know in part.”**
- Our passage of scripture today is a deep pool, especially verse 13, which says, **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”**
  - Here the cross is being described through the idea of Jesus being cursed. I will refer to this as “the curse motif.” A motif is a theme that runs through a story. The curse motif is a theme that runs through the Bible and to the cross.
- So today I propose that we splash around a little in verses 10-12 as we talk about the background to the curse motif.
  - Then we will but spend some time diving deep into verse 13 as we explore the meaning of the curse motif. But be warned in advance, this verse is so deep that after a few minutes of diving we are going to run out of air. I can only take you so far. God alone knows how deep this pool goes.
    - Then we will finish by sitting on the edge of this pool as we contemplate the significance of the curse motif.

### THE BACKGROUND OF THE CURSE MOTIF

- So as let’s begin by jumping into the pool as we consider **(SHOW SLIDE 2) the background to the curse motif.**
  - This whole idea of a being under a curse and Jesus freeing us from a curse sounds primitive to modern ears. It reeks of superstition. When I was Tanzania a few years ago I met a village witch doctor. This man gets paid to go around putting curses on people and then gets paid to take curses off people. To educated and urban west coast people this is ridiculous.
    - So if we are going to dive deep into the curse motif of Jesus’ death the first thing we must understand is the Old Testament background because this has nothing to do with superstition.
- To do this turn back with me to Deuteronomy 28. Here God takes Israel to be his people. It is just like a marriage ceremony. When two people get married they make a covenant with each other. They make vows to love each other and vows to not to do certain things like cheat on each other.
  - That is what is happening here. God had rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. And now the Creator of heaven and earth is entering into a relationship with Israel. His covenant also had these two

sides: rewards for obedience and punishments for disobedience. These were called blessings and curses.

- So look at verses 1-6 and notice all the blessings of the covenant.
  - **READ 1-6** - *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. <sup>2</sup> And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. <sup>3</sup> Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. <sup>4</sup> Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. <sup>5</sup> Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. <sup>6</sup> Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.*
- God goes on listing blessing after blessing for another 8 verses. R.C. Sproul, whom I am borrowing some thoughts from today, writes this:
  - *“It’s as if God is saying ‘if you keep these terms, if you obey the commandments I have given you, I’ll bless you when you stand up, I’ll bless you when you sit down, I’ll bless you when you are silent, I’ll bless you when you speak, I’ll bless you when you’re in the city, I’ll bless you in the country, I’ll bless you when you’re on the highway, I’ll bless you when you’re on the seas. Everywhere you go, everything you do, you’ll be blessed.’”<sup>1</sup>*
- But then notice what happens in verse 15 if they do not obey the terms of the covenant. **READ 15-19.**
  - *<sup>15</sup> “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. <sup>16</sup> Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. <sup>17</sup> Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. <sup>18</sup> Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. <sup>19</sup> Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.*
- Now come back to Galatians 3:13. Paul is asserting something huge here. He is asserting that every human being stands under the curse of God. Isn’t that what verse 13 assumes? **READ 13** - *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.* If Christ had to redeem us from the curse then the obvious assumption is that we are all under God’s curse.
  - But this is wildly unpopular in our culture. Oh of course we believe that murderers may be under the curse of God but if you ask the average person on the street if God accepts them they will say, **“Of course he does, I’m a good person.”**
    - People operate on a performance-based relationship with God. But listen, you do not want to relate to God on the basis of your performance. Why not?
- Follow Paul’s logic in verse 10. **READ 10-12** - *<sup>10</sup> For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” <sup>11</sup> Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” <sup>12</sup> But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”*
  - Do you see the logic? There are two ways to relate to God: by faith or by law. Follow this carefully now: if you want to relate to God on the basis of law, of being a good person, you can do that. God does accept good people. Look at verse 12b. **READ 12b** - *The one who does them shall live by them.* If you obey the law then you are, by definition good, and God will accept you.
    - But Paul says this is an insane way to relate to God. Why? Because to be considered good, you must obey the law perfectly. If you don’t then the law itself will curse you. Look at verse 10. **READ 10** - *For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”*
  - So if you say to God, **“I want to relate to you on the basis of my own goodness.”** God will say, **“Alright. The standard of goodness is perfect obedience for your whole life. Do this and you will**

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Truth of the Cross*, 123-124.

**live. But if you break the law at just one point you will fall under the curse of the law for the law itself will condemn you.”**

- So do you see why Paul asserts that we are all under God’s curse? It is because no one but Jesus has perfectly kept the law. As Romans 3:23 says **“all have sinned.”**
  - It is not just murderers, it is you and I. Have you really loved God perfectly? Have you really loved other people perfectly?
    - Who will dare to stand before God and say, **“I have kept your law perfectly?”** Who will say to God, **“I am a good person and deserve your blessing?”** The law exposes us as people who have not attained perfect goodness.
- Having understood this background be sobered by this fact: apart from Jesus, we all stand under the curse of God.

## THE MEANING OF THE CURSE MOTIF

- Now we are ready to dive as deep as we can into this verse. In the second place let’s consider **(SHOW SLIDE 3) the meaning of the curse motif.** Here I want us to consider what it means to be cursed by God?
  - If you really want to understand this you have to understand what it means to be blessed by God. Only then you can understand the opposite of blessing. The best place to go to understand blessing is Numbers 6, to what we called the priestly benediction. A benediction is a blessing. **(SHOW SLIDE 4) The LORD bless you and keep you; <sup>25</sup> the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; <sup>26</sup> the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.**
    - This blessing is a certain type of poetry in which each line says the same thing but in a different way. If you don’t understand the first line you look at the next one. So, what does it mean to be blessed by God? Blessing means having God’s face turned toward you, to be bathed in the glory that shines from his countenance, enjoying peace, shalom, the fullness of life before God.
- To see the face of God is the great longing of the people of God. I Corinthians 13: **“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.”** The great hope of Revelation 21-22 is that God will dwell with his people and **“They shall see his face.”**
  - Eternal life means to have God’s face turned toward you in loving relationship forever and ever.
- But what will that be like? What will it be like to see God? You have probably heard that song on Christian radio entitled, **“I can only imagine.”**

***I can only imagine, What it will be like  
When I walk, By Your side  
I can only imagine, What my eyes will see  
When Your face, Is before me  
I can only imagine  
CHORUS: Surrounded by Your glory, what will my heart feel  
Will I dance for You Jesus or in awe of You be still  
Will I stand in Your presence or to my knees will I fall  
Will I sing hallelujah, will I be able to speak at all  
I can only imagine***
- If the blessing of God means being in right relationship with God forever, having the face of God turned toward you in peace, then what is the curse? It is the opposite: to have the face of God turned away from you. If a benediction is calling down a blessing, then we are now talking about God’s malediction, his calling down a curse. To be cursed of God is to hear the opposite of Numbers 6.
  - **“May the LORD curse you, forsaking you and abandoning you. May the LORD turn his face away from you and remove all grace. May the LORD turn his back to you and remove his peace from you forever.**
    - To be cursed of God then means to have that relationship with him severed. It means that God has forsaken you.

- Now we are ready for Galatians 3:13. To our great joy we discover that there is a way for us to escape the curse that is due to us for our sins. To our great joy we discover that **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.”** How? **“By becoming a curse for us.”**
  - Note careful that Jesus was not being cursed for his own sin, for he had no sin. No, he became a curse. And why would Jesus become cursed? The key is in those words, **‘for us.’** God took our sin and put it on the head of his Son. We saw this a few weeks ago when the high priest confessed the sins of the people over the scapegoat and then sent it the sin bearing scapegoat outside the camp.
    - 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.”** So in that moment all the evil in the universe was concentrated in on Jesus. God did not just place my sin on Jesus. He placed yours. He placed the sins of billions upon His Son.
- All the imagery of Calvary points to Jesus being cursed by God.
  - Like the scapegoat, Jesus was driven outside the holy city, outside of presence of God in the temple, to be crucified.
  - Jesus was crucified on a tree. All through the Bible and ancient culture people understood that to be hung on a tree meant you were under the curse of God.
  - Further, we read that when he hung upon the cross a supernatural darkness came over the whole land. Having been made sin, God turns the light of his face away from His Son and even the light of the sun is dimmed.
  - Finally, and most clearly, we know that Jesus was cursed by God on the cross because when God turned his face away Jesus could take it no more and screams, **“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

#### WHAT MUST IT HAVE BEEN LIKE TO FACE THE CURSE OF GOD?

- Let us dive even deeper into what Jesus experienced. The light of the sun is gone. The water is getting cold and it is beginning to crush us. But let’s keep going deeper as we consider how terrible this moment must have been for Jesus to be forsaken by God.
  - You may have been deserted by a spouse, by family, or by friends but God is still there.
  - You may even feel forsaken by God but you gain hope as you recall the scripture where God says to you, **“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.”**<sup>2</sup>
    - What must it have been like then for Jesus in his great distress to find himself all alone with the face of God turned away from him? **“My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”**
- The depths of this grief are magnified when we consider the unbroken fellowship and communion Jesus enjoyed with his Father throughout his life. At his baptism and his transfiguration the Father spoke from heaven and said, **“This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”**<sup>3</sup>
  - And now he experiences for the first time what it means to lose that fellowship. He had never known such darkness and all he can do is cry out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**
- He had silently dealt with the fact that he was forsaken by his nation, by his disciples, and by the crowds. Never does he ask, **“Judas, why have you forsaken me?”** or **“Peter, why have you forsaken me?”**
  - These hurt him but the piercing blow came in the darkness of the cross. **“My God, why have you forsaken me?”**
- This is even more remarkable when we consider that this is *not* the way God deals with his people in distress and death. The Christian cries out, **“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”** Why? **“For you are with me.”** He was with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fire. The martyrs of history have testified in the midst of their tortures that God was with them.
  - Not so with the Jesus. When he asks this gut-wrenching question all he hears is silence. God’s back is turned. He is all alone. The smile of God is hidden. He is cut off. **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 13:5.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3:17; 17:5.

- But how are we to understand this? Are we saying that for a short time God the Father and God the Spirit split from God the Son so that God was duality rather than trinity? Certainly not! God the Son was never separated in essence from God the Father or God the Spirit. Did Jesus' divine nature leave him so that this is only his human nature that is forsaken? No. We can't split his nature like that. Well, how does God forsake his Son?
  - I don't know. I told you I can only take you so deep into the pool of these words. I have taken you as far as I am able. My air has run out. Stare in awestruck wonder at Jesus, the God-forsaken Messiah, who **“redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”**

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CURSE MOTIF

- As we come back to the surface, let's just sit on the side of the pool now and contemplate what all this means. In our last few minutes let's consider **(SHOW SLIDE 5) the significance of the curse motif.**
  - A scholar named D.A. Carson put me onto what is perhaps the best four lines ever written on the significance of the curse motif. It comes from a 19<sup>th</sup> century poet named Elizabeth Browning. She wrote a three-page poem entitled, **“On Cowper's Grave.”**
    - The reference is to William Cowper who was a prolific hymn writer, brilliant literary critic, and close friend of John Newton (the author of *Amazing Grace*). One of Cowper's famous hymns that you know is **“There is a fountain filled with blood.”** What you may not know is that besides writing hymns Cowper was a renowned scholar.
      - He was also a man who sunk into the deepest depths of depression and was institutionalized four times because of severe depression.
- A century after his death Browning picked up her pen to write. She reflects on Cowper's brilliance as a scholar. She then moves on to extol his hymns and how he taught the church to sing. Then she alludes to his depression and then right at the end Browning writes in reference to this passage, **(SHOW SLIDE 6)**
  - ***Yea, once Immanuel's orphaned cry His universe hath shaken -  
It went up single, echoless, “My God, I am forsaken.”  
It went up from the Holy's lips amid his lost creation,  
That, of the lost, no son should cry those words of desolation.***
    - That of the lost, no son should cry those words of desolation.
- Do you see the point? As Carson puts it, Jesus cries this abysmal cry under the curse of God so that for all eternity William Cowper might never have to cry it. Jesus cries this abysmal cry under the curse of God so that Barton Priebe may never have to cry this. Not ever!
  - Jesus took upon our curse and was forsaken of God that no sinner might ever have to know what it means to be forsaken of God.
- So, this brings each of us to a decision point: will we relate to God on the basis of our own goodness or on the basis of faith in Jesus?
  - You can relate to him on the basis of being good. And I have no doubt that you have done many good things but are you good enough? But you must realize that the standard of goodness is God's law. To be good enough you must perfectly love God and perfectly love other people.
    - To fail at even one point is to fall under the curse of the law and have God's face turned away from you for all eternity.
  - The second way is by faith in Jesus. Faith means saying, **“I am not good enough. I have sinned. Jesus, please make me right with God. Jesus, please take the curse for me that I might have God's face turned toward me for all eternity.”**
- The best news a person can ever hear is that there is a way to escape the curse that is due to us for our sins. That way is through faith in Jesus Christ for God became a man in order to redeem us from the curse. He did this by becoming a curse. He was forsaken by God that, of the lost, no son or daughter should cry those words of desolation.