

When Curse Becomes Blessing

John Calvin

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith . . .—Gal. 3:13-18

As we have seen, if our only hope of salvation rested upon the condition that we fulfil our duty, we would all be condemned; for we have all fallen short in many different ways and are, therefore, guilty in the eyes of God. Indeed, even the holiest amongst us can never claim to have reached a state of perfection, never again to fall, and free from all infirmity! We are, therefore, led to conclude that we will all be lost and condemned when God calls us to account. This is man's true condition, despite the high regard he may have for himself! Therefore, we need some means of escape from the curse we are under. Otherwise, what good will it do us to have our ears daily assailed by the Word of God? It will only push us closer towards eternal death. Thus, in order that the Word of God should profit and assist us to find salvation, we have to find a way of escape from the sentence of judgment pronounced upon the human race. Paul points out the way of escape to us here: 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.' He shows us that it was not in vain that our Lord Jesus Christ hung on the tree, for he suffered to bear the curse of all those he would call to salvation.

As we have said, we are all under this curse, which means it was necessary for our Lord to take our burden of sin upon himself. In the law of Moses, it is written: 'Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree' (Deut. 21:23). Our Lord commanded that the bodies of the dead should be removed from sight, because it was a disgrace to see a human body thus defiled and therefore he desired it to be taken away. Yet, when God pronounced this curse upon all who hung upon a tree, he knew only too well what was going to happen to his only Son. For the Lord Jesus Christ did not suffer such a death by accident, nor according to the whim of man. Whilst it is true that he was crucified by unbelievers, it had been ordained by the will of God (Acts 2:23; 4:28). As it is written, God so loved the world that he did not even spare his only Son, but delivered him up to death for us. Indeed, if his death had been determined by Judas alone, who had him wickedly and forcibly led away, this could not be the foundation for our salvation at all! We must remember that God had appointed it thus, as Peter expounds in greater depth in Acts chapter two, verse twenty-three, where he states that the wicked hands that crucified our Lord Jesus did no more than God had previously determined in his will. Thus, when we read that our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, we must remember that it was all for our salvation, because by this means God was seeking to reconcile us to himself. Therefore, when God said, 'Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree', he was not ignorant of what was going to occur, for all had been settled and predetermined.

These two facts must be carefully held together—that God has said that whoever hangs upon a tree is cursed, but that it was his will for his own Son to suffer thus. Why was this? He took our burden upon himself, as our substitute, and made himself, as it were, the chief of sinners on our behalf. Jesus Christ became a curse in order to deliver us from the curse of the law. It may seem harsh and strange at first sight that the Lord of Glory, he who has all sovereign authority, and before whom all the angels of heaven tremble and prostrate themselves, should be subject to a curse. But we must call to mind what Paul wrote in the first letter to the Corinthians, that is to say, that gospel teaching is foolishness to the human race, who regard themselves as wise (1 Cor. 1:18, 23). In deed, in this way, God humbles us for our folly. For there is enough wise and good instruction, if we care to heed it, in the heaven and earth around us; yet we are blind and shut our eyes to God's wisdom displayed in

nature. This is why he has opened up a new way to draw us to himself—through something which we deem foolish! Thus, we must not judge what we read here, concerning the curse to which the Son of God was subject, by our own human reasoning. Instead, we should delight in such a mystery and give glory to God that he loved our souls so much that he redeemed them at such inestimable cost to himself. Far from detracting from the majesty of our Lord Jesus Christ, or obscuring the glory which the Holy Scriptures attribute to him, this teaching provides occasion to glorify him even more. Indeed, may we all do so, for here is our Lord Jesus Christ refusing to consider it robbery (as Paul expresses it) to reveal himself in his infinite glory (Phil. 2:6). He willingly emptied himself; he not only took upon himself a human nature and became a man, but he also submitted to a most shameful death in the sight of both God and man. How precious to him we must have been for him to allow himself to experience such extreme suffering for our redemption! If we could but taste something of what this implies, we would forever magnify the unspeakable grace which surpasses all human understanding. However, although we cannot comprehend it fully, and can only fathom the hundredth part of it, it delights us to know that we can grasp something of its meaning, however small!

Yet, how this exposes the malice and perversity that is in man! For when Paul declares that our Lord Jesus Christ became a curse for us, it washes over us. There are even those who are so depraved that they will see this as an occasion to behave scandalously, abandoning the gospel altogether when they hear of the way in which Christ has redeemed us. Such people say, 'What! Can it be that the Son of God, the fountain of all that is good, and the one who sanctifies us, has been cursed?' To their way of thinking, God has acted in an unreasonable and disorderly fashion! But, (as I have been saying), God had to stoop to this 'folly' because we did not respond to his wisdom, though the way was clearly evident; thus he exposes our own ignorance! We can only wonder at the mysteries of God, for their significance may be obscure to us and seem strange; for in the face of such wonders, our intellect fails and our powers of reasoning are confounded!

The fact that the Son of God became a curse for us demands a fuller examination of our sinful state. Indeed, we begin to realise that we are detestable in the eyes of God, that is, until our sins and iniquities have been cleansed in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. For even if all the angels of heaven were to be made answerable for us, the price they would pay would be insufficient. The only one able to make satisfaction for our sins is the Lord Jesus Christ. But, when he came to this world, it was not by a display of divine and heavenly power that he paid our debt of eternal death. How, then, did he come? In weakness; indeed, not only so, but he was accursed. If this had not been the case, our burdens would have crushed us and all would have perished in the abyss. When we understand that the Son of God, the Lamb without blemish, the mirror and fountain of all righteousness, that this One was cursed for us, should we not be horrified at the thought of all our sins and engulfed in despair until God rescues us in his grace and infinite mercy? Therefore, let us be aware that when God says he has redeemed us from the curse of the law, it is to bring us to a state of complete humility. We can never be humble unless we are first stripped of self-confidence and become ashamed at what lies within us. Then we are frightened and lost, knowing that the wrath of God hangs over us until the remedy is applied to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, our whole life is detestable in God's sight and there is no means of reconciliation with him apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, who takes away the curse which is upon us and bears it himself. Now, each time that we read this passage, we should arise and present ourselves before the judgment seat of God, aware that there is a pit waiting to swallow us up if we remain as we are. Let us feel our lost condition and be ashamed before God. Furthermore, let us magnify the grace bought for us by the Son of God, and be careful not to detract from his worth in any way whatsoever, even though he became a curse. This ought, rather, to stir us to render all the praise that he deserves, for he has proved our salvation to be so precious to him.

Moreover, let us properly appreciate such a pledge of our salvation and display of the love God has for us, and let us not doubt that we are acceptable in God's sight when we approach him. For he has redeemed us at such a cost, as Peter shows in his first epistle—not with silver or corruptible things

but with the Lord Jesus Christ who became a ransom for us (1 Pet. 1:18). Therefore, we must trust that whenever we come in his name to ask for mercy, it will be bestowed upon us. But if we come believing that we have a scrap of merit, what good is it? We know how much the Father loves the Son, and how precious his death was in his sight. For this reason, we can have full confidence that God will forgive us and be favourable and kind to us if we cleave to what Paul shows us here: namely, that our Lord Jesus Christ spared nothing for us, even to the point of bearing our curse.

However, let us turn our attention to what Paul continues to say: 'That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.' By mentioning Abraham, he reveals that the promise belonged first to those who descended from him. For the gift of salvation was for the Jews until God opened the doors to everyone else, and spread his gospel abroad, that all might share in the redemption purchased by the Lord Jesus Christ. For although this promise originally belonged to the Jews and was peculiar to them, it was made applicable to the whole world. How is this possible? Because the promise originated in the Spirit and was not dependent upon observing the ceremonies. By referring us to the Spirit, Paul blots out all the false doctrines taught by seducers who sought to mix the law and the gospel together. He is revealing that now all these things are superfluous, that is to say, sacrifices, circumcision and suchlike. This is not to argue that we cannot profit by reading what is contained in the law: no, but the practice of it has been abolished. This is why we can say that the promise is a spiritual one for us today, because we no longer need the types and shadows of days gone by. Now we are simply called and invited to commune with our God. Now we are able to cry to him with complete confidence, because, having been adopted by him, we lean entirely upon the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only foundation the gospel allows; we find all we need in him. This is, in effect, what Paul intends us to learn from this passage.

To reinforce the message, he adds another point which proves that the gospel is the perfect revelation of the way of salvation, and that we need no other teaching but the simple doctrine of justification through the free grace of our God. He tells us that the law was given four hundred and thirty years after the free promise of salvation. Now we know that a covenant made between men, if it is to be authentic, must stand, no matter what happens. It follows, therefore, that the law was not given to cancel what God had promised to Abraham and his descendants (and consequently to the rest of us). We may at first question this argument of Paul's, thinking that a second contract must annul the first. As soon as men have entered an agreement, they are liable to have second thoughts and change their minds, making the first contract null and void. The same applies to laws and statutes, for a first law can easily be broken and invalidated by a second. But Paul presupposes something which needs to be considered, which is that if a man has promised and solemnly obligated himself to do something, he cannot retrace his steps—the agreement must remain firm. Yet, if two parties were to agree together to change their previous resolutions by mutual consent, this is a different case. Indeed, such an example is almost irrelevant here if we bear in mind that men change their ideas so lightly at the slightest whim. Paul, however, presupposes that the 'person' in question has made a covenant which will endure, and which will not be disputed or contravened afterwards in any way whatsoever. If one of the parties were to break that original covenant, it would be counted terrible treachery which all men alike would judge intolerable, since the agreement was so solemnly and formally recorded that it must be upheld and maintained without the slightest contradiction. Now, is it possible that there could be less constancy in God than in a man, who is mere vanity by comparison? Therefore, I conclude that the gospel promise holds firm because the free promise was made before the arrival of the law.

All this could mystify us if it were not explained in greater detail. We have already dealt with the contrast Paul makes between the law and the gospel in previous studies. When God promised salvation, it was upon condition that we served him, completely fulfilling our duty to him. This, however, is not possible; thus, we are excluded from all hope of salvation by the law. It is not that God

is unfaithful on his part: it is we who do not meet his requirements! It is like a man who says, 'I am willing to sell goods to you on condition that you have the money.' Thus, whoever does not have a penny cannot buy any of the goods, for this is the condition that was set down in the first place. Similarly, God promises that we will inherit salvation if we serve him, but this does not benefit us because we cannot fulfil what he demands. Indeed, we are so full of iniquity, so polluted and infected in his sight, that he quite justly regards us with detestation. Therefore, we all stand condemned under the law. However, God freely and graciously accepts us through the Lord Jesus Christ, who offers us the remission of our sins. In fact, he greatly desires us to accept the grace that we are offered and to lean completely on the Lord Jesus Christ, not upon ourselves.

Now Paul asks, 'Which is more ancient—the free promise of salvation or the law?' We are aware of the difference between them. Now, if the law were the more ancient, it must hold firm, because God never changes and is not subject to variation. However, if the free promise came first and was made before the law was decreed, then we must conclude that God has not changed his mind, nor withdrawn his original promise. He would not have desired the abolition of this covenant, for such would have been a withdrawal of his kindness and mercy. If, at one time, he bound himself out of his free bounty to give salvation to men on a basis other than merit, subsequently changing his mind as if he desired us to enrich him by our good works, it would be absurd! Paul tells us that the free promise was given before the law. It therefore follows that the law does not change anything about the promise; its nature and its force remain intact. Whilst it is true that the Lord Jesus Christ had not yet been born on earth when the promise was made to our father Abraham, he had already been chosen as our Mediator because, through him we would be reconciled to God.

Now, in case we think that the law must have been unnecessary, or that there must have been a change of mind on the part of God, Paul next addresses this matter. We must not become confused; though it is not possible to explain everything in an hour, nor indeed in a day, it is enough for the moment for us to have this one fact clearly understood: that the promise to ordain us to be his children was made by God before the law. Indeed, it was not made with reference to our merit or personal worthiness; God did this out of his own goodness and mercy and expected nothing from us because he knew we were full of nothing but wretched sin. This promise had its foundation in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose office was already that of Mediator, granting access to God the Father. Having said this, we conclude that this promise will endure to the end of the world. The main reason this must be said is because the Jews tended to boast in their heritage. Paul seeks to tell them that their father Abraham did not have the law and yet was content, although he did, of course, offer sacrifices and the like. But, even though he was eventually circumcised, at the time he received the promise no written code as yet existed and not even any circumcision. For although Abraham was not circumcised when he received the promise, he was, nevertheless, justified apart from circumcision by faith alone. Therefore, Paul demonstrates to the Jews that it is very foolish indeed to count themselves in a category apart from the rest of humanity, and to base their hopes upon the types and shadows of the law, seeing that their father Abraham, the chief patriarch of the church, was justified in the same way as people today. In other words, he was justified by the mercy of God alone, having recognised that he was a poor sinner, lost and condemned in Adam, and that the only blessing he could hope for was to be included in the promise made in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what we are to remember.

Next, we must carefully consider the promise addressed directly to Abraham, which revealed to him that all nations on earth would be blessed through his seed (Gen. 12:3). Now, there are two main points made here. One is that the blessing is not only promised to the earthly descendants of Abraham (as we have seen), but to the whole world in general. Thus, we who descend from Gentile stock (that is, from those who are unclean and who were originally banished from the heavenly kingdom) can also share in this promise. Although we do not belong to that holy lineage that God chose at the beginning, yet now salvation extends even to us. How is this? Because it was promised that all the

nations on earth would be blessed. This being the case, dare we speak as if God has withdrawn his liberal hand, and only seeks the descendants of Abraham, when he had already declared that he would reveal himself as the Saviour and Father of mankind when the time was right? Thus, the most important point here is this: though this promise was made to Abraham, it did not apply to his physical descendants alone, but to all men, even though this was not apparent at first because the fulness of time had not come, as we shall see in the following chapter.

The second point is that the blessing promised to Abraham was for his seed. Paul says that he does not refer to 'seeds' in the plural, but to one seed; we must, therefore, conclude that he is referring to Jesus Christ. We might perhaps have felt that Paul is making much of something which has little relevance; after all, the term 'seed' refers simply to descendants, not specifically to one man, nor to ten, nor to forty! Surely, it speaks of a whole race of people, the seed of Abraham being the race that descends from him. Indeed, this comprised such a great multitude that it was said to be like twelve peoples (Gen. 17:6); for when we refer to a people, we speak of about a hundred thousand men, and there were more than this in the tribe of Judah alone! Thus, it would seem that Paul had not properly considered what God intended by this word 'seed', when he says that it refers to just one man. But we must weigh up Paul's conclusions in order to realise that they are correct and firmly established; indeed, we shall see that his argument is utterly infallible.

Abraham did not have just one son; after Ishmael, he had Isaac. And what happened to his oldest son? He was cast out of his house, as we shall see when we come to consider the next chapter. Thus, here is Ishmael, who has all the privileges of being the first-born of Abraham's household, being cast out like a stranger, just as it is written, 'Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac' (Gen. 21:10). After this, other children were born to him (Gen. 25:1ff). He gave each one their allotted portion and then sent them away. Only Isaac remained with Abraham. In time Isaac had two children, twins born of the same womb (Gen. 25:22-23). The first-born, Esau, who ought to have had the authority, was rejected and not counted as a descendant of Abraham; thus, he had no share in the promised blessings. That left only Jacob, for his father ignorantly and mistakenly blessed him, then declared that he could not withdraw that blessing, nor alter what he had said since he had been the instrument of the Holy Spirit (Gen. 27:37). If we take the term 'seed' to apply to those who descend from Abraham, then surely this will include such people as the Ishmaelites and Hagarenes (as they are called) and the like. If this were so, the Idumaeans, their servants, might also be counted as part of his household. But the inheritance was taken away from these people. Therefore, the phrase 'the seed of Abraham' must be understood in a rather different way.

Let us think through the issue for a moment. Without faith, what would unite the church? There would be no sure means of discerning the spiritual seed of Abraham. How would we distinguish them from the rest of mankind? The only way is by coming to the Head, in other words, to the Lord Jesus Christ. The unity of the body depends on its Head, on its Redeemer. This is why Paul says that the promise does not refer to seed in the plural, but to one man, to whom we must come if we are to discover his spiritual people. In other words, if we desire to locate the church of God, we must start with the Lord Jesus Christ, because his own will be gathered round him. All who belong to his body and cleave to him by faith are the children of God, and are his servants. These are truly the seed of Abraham. This is discussed more fully in the Epistle to the Romans, chapter nine, verse six, where it says, 'They are not all Israel who are of Israel.' How is this? Well, there was really only one child of promise: Isaac. Therefore, we must come to the Lord Jesus Christ, for in him all the promises of God are 'yes and amen', being absolutely firm and sure (2 Cor. 1:20). Without him, we would all be lost. This is why it is written in the first chapter of Colossians, verse twenty, that the office of the Lord Jesus Christ was to gather together all that had been scattered in heaven and on earth; without him, we would all be confounded.

Now we can see much more clearly the line of Paul's argument. Before the law was imparted to the world, that is, before we were informed of our duty to obey all that is written therein, God had already revealed his good pleasure. Seeing the human race lost and condemned, he desired to bring his elect to himself in order to bestow mercy on them. This was not only for one race but for 'all nations' as the Scripture asserts. And the source of that mercy is the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, when Abraham was alive, our Lord Jesus Christ had already been appointed Mediator, that through him the wrath of God against us might be appeased. Thus, when we come in his name asking for grace, it will be supplied to us and our expectations will not be disappointed. This had already been established and, happily, nothing has changed; we can be sure that God accepts us today if we are fully rooted and grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ. For the covenant made in his name shall not change—it is permanent and will always be in force. Thus, we may freely come before God and call upon him as our Father since he has adopted us as his children; not because there was anything worthy in us, but only because of his mercy are we united by faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.

However, in order to receive the grace of God and have assurance of salvation, we need to renounce all opinions we might have of our own worth. We must give heed to what is declared in this passage concerning faith, for it is only through faith that we are enabled to enjoy such blessing. Faith (as we have explained) means that we embrace the mercy of God. But we cannot have faith until we have been touched with a sense of our own poverty, for the Lord Jesus Christ, by becoming a curse for us, presents us with a picture of our cursed state. Faith, therefore, cannot exist without repentance, for it is not possible for us to come to God seeking salvation and asking him to pity our miserable condition, unless we have been convicted in our souls and led to deplore ourselves. Hypocrites who mock at God by wallowing, intoxicated, in their sins, must not expect Jesus Christ to receive them as his own; for such people may not even so much as approach him. Indeed, his invitation is intended for those who labour and are heavy laden (Matt. 11:28), who can bear no more and who stagger under the burden of their sins. This is how we must approach the Lord Jesus Christ, not with any merit of our own; for all the ceremonial law and all the sacrifices we could offer cannot contribute to our salvation. Rather, before God shows us mercy, we must come in a state of humility, fully aware of our miserable condition. We are first brought low in order that we might perceive the curse that we are under, before we can rejoice that we have been purchased at such inestimable cost. This has been our theme throughout our study.

Thus, it is by faith that we receive the promise of the Spirit and become united to the Lord Jesus Christ. We become part of the spiritual seed of Abraham. Although we do not physically descend from his family, it is enough that we are united together with him by faith. Indeed, we have been regenerated by incorruptible seed, as Peter says, in other words by the Word of God, the Scriptures (1 Pet. 1:23). Having been transformed, we understand that God accepts us as part of the body of his only Son. Though of Gentile descent, we can still be joined to his church, since faith is all that is required. Here, all pride in human virtues and merits must cease, and men must recognise that they shall be utterly confounded unless they seek God in the way that he has appointed. Having said this, let us learn not to be blown here and there, like unstable men, who will not be content with what God has declared but must always add something to it of their devising. We need to guard against such an unholy mixture. I intend to expand upon this after lunch in the will of God. Let Jesus Christ be our sufficiency, since our salvation depends entirely upon him; we will lack nothing if we have an interest in him. This is the point to which Paul frequently returns in this book. Furthermore, he desires that we hold fast to God's truth, knowing that it does not allow for any additions. Were we to add to it, we would corrupt, pervert and falsify the covenant upon which our salvation depends. Having embraced our Lord Jesus Christ, we are expected to remain fully in him, because this one man has sufficient grace for us all. In him, we can call upon God boldly, knowing that, although we descend from the accursed race of Adam, we, nevertheless, receive blessing in Jesus Christ. He now accepts us as his children and freely adopts us. He desires that this message should be heard throughout the world—there is now an open door and free access by which we may draw near to him.

Now let us fall before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our sins, and asking that he would make us increasingly conscious of them, that we may detest them. May we spend our lives seeking and striving to honour and serve him in strict obedience. And since we cannot free ourselves owing to our great infirmity, may he bear us up until he has freed us from all the defilements of the flesh, and clothed us in his righteousness. Indeed, he has begun this work in us now and affords us solid ground of assurance that what he has begun, he will complete. Thus, we all say, Almighty God and our heavenly Father, etc.

Marked up by Lance George Marshall