

## THE LAW IS A CURSE;

## FAITH IS A BLESSING



### Galatians 3:10-14

This Study Paper contains the following

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses (Three sermon outlines)
- 📁 Focus Point: Biblical theology 1
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### Introduction to the passage

Having shown in verses 6 – 9 that sinners are accepted in God’s sight by faith alone, Paul now uses **three arguments** to show that acceptance cannot be by their keeping God’s law.

### What these verses mean

Verse 10

***All who rely on observing the law are under a curse,***

Trying to obey and keep religious laws is not only a wrong understanding of God’s ways but it has very serious consequences. Anyone who tries to please God by relying upon himself is under a curse. A curse is a pronouncement of ill, which will lead to destruction and death. Being under the curse is being separated from God, unacceptable to him now **and** eternally banished from him after death. Paul regards observing the law as the opposite of being “of faith”. If salvation is by the latter method, as proved in verses 6–9, it cannot be by the former.

***for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”***

Paul sets out **argument one** by quoting from Deuteronomy 27:26, showing that whoever does not have Abraham’s faith (verse 9) is cursed, because the law brings a curse on sinners.

The bringing together of Deuteronomy 27:26 and Galatians 3:10 highlights the two ways of breaking the law. One is in inward intention (does not uphold the words of this law); the other is in outward action (does not continue to do everything written). Jesus made this difference clear in Matthew 5:21-48 when speaking about murder and adultery. Only the perfect law-keeping of both inward intention and outward action can be pleasing to God. There is no one except Jesus Christ who has ever done this.

The false teachers were saying that God was pleased with outward action – e.g. circumcision. Paul says, “Those who only keep the law outwardly are cursed because God requires inward obedience.” Moses in Deuteronomy 27:26 is saying, “Those who do not keep the law inwardly are cursed.” (It is interesting to notice how the twelve things cursed in Deuteronomy 27:15-26 are things that can happen inwardly or in secret.) So Moses and Paul are saying the same thing. To fail in perfect law-keeping is to be cursed. All do fail as Paul sets out in his letter to the Romans (3:20-23). This option of pleasing God by obeying the law is impossible and not available to human beings. It is a curse because it leads to death and destruction.

Verse 11

***Clearly no-one is justified before God by the law,***

Here is **argument two**. Justification never has been by a person keeping God’s law. (Abraham was justified without that – verse 6). Justification had been by faith throughout the Old Testament time. See Hebrews 11.

***because, “The righteous will live by faith.”***

Paul quotes from Habakkuk 2:4. The context of this is the invasion of Israel by the Chaldeans (Babylonians) as part of God’s judgement upon Israel. The Chaldeans considered themselves as invincible and represent the boastful, arrogant and self-sufficient man. God, speaking to Habakkuk, contrasts those who are puffed up and think they can do things their way with those who put their trust in God, believing wholeheartedly in his Word. Here is proof that faith, as the way of righteousness in God’s sight, is not a new truth. God revealed it to Habakkuk as well as to Abraham.

Verse 12

***The law is not based on faith;***

You cannot mix together **law-keeping** and **living by faith** as a basis of pleasing God. God’s law was not given to be a possible way of salvation. It could not be so because it was given to those who were already guilty sinners. Guilt for past sin cannot be removed by future law-keeping.

The law was given as a method by which the Jews could be convinced of their sin (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:24). It was additional to the promise of salvation by faith (Rom. 5:20; Gal. 3:16-24) to make the way of faith attractive to those who know they are law-breakers.

on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them."

Paul now quotes from Leviticus 18:5 as he continues to emphasise to the Galatians the different principles upon which law and faith are based. If you set out to use the law as a way of salvation then you must keep it faultlessly. You will have earned your salvation and God will owe you your justification. However, this is impossible and it would not be long before this method showed itself to be an utter failure for sinful human beings. Throughout the Old Testament God has said that salvation is by believing not by doing. Law and faith are opposite methods. By law-keeping we try to make God believe in us: by faith we believe in God.

Verse 13

***Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,***

The curse of the law lies upon all people without exception. The good news is that there is a way of escape. It does not have to end in death and separation from God because Jesus Christ has redeemed us from the curse. Paul is using the language of slavery, which was so common at the time. A slave could be bought out of his slavery and made free. The slaves were sold at the forum (slave market) and the word redeem means to acquire out of the forum. The comparison Paul is using is the way sin takes hold of a person. A person cannot shake sin off; he cannot reject it. Sin is their master and wherever they go they are slaves to that sin. But Christ can buy us out of that situation, make us free. What did he do or rather, what sort of cost was involved?

***for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."***

Paul reveals the method by which Christ redeems us by again turning to the Old Testament, quoting this time from Deuteronomy 21:23. Although Paul uses this verse with reference to Christ's death on the cross, strictly speaking it does not refer to crucifixion because this method of execution was not practised then. The Old Testament regulation referred to hanging up a dead criminal's body as a declaration that that person was a curse to the nation. How much more was the hanging up of a living body on a tree, in order that it should die, the sign of a curse? Christ physically crucified symbolised Christ spiritually cursed. Jews who refuse to accept Christ as true Messiah speak of him as "the cursed one". See 1 Corinthians 12:3.

Here is **argument three**: Salvation is clearly through Christ alone, not through human efforts. He came and took our place and took upon himself the punishment we deserve. He acted as our **substitute**. If we could save ourselves, why should Christ have endured the unutterable horror of bearing the curse of all his people? That curse he bore; that curse he exhausted; there is no more curse for believers in him (Is. 53:4-6). Even the sacrifices commanded by the law have no purpose now, for Christ has shed his blood. Thus we see again that salvation is by faith in Christ.

Verse 14

***He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus,***

Those for whom Jesus Christ died as a substitute are no longer under the curse. Instead, they will now be blessed. This blessing is the same blessing that was given to Abraham. The law was given only to the Jews but it is not the way of salvation; it only demonstrates to them how impossible it is to obtain salvation by our own means. Faith is the way both for Jews and Gentiles. It is not a matter of my lineage but what I believe, whom I trust. The blessing can only come through Jesus Christ and not trying to obey the law. The promise given to Abraham was for his spiritual descendants, not his physical, natural family. This included all the different types of peoples on the earth (Gentiles) and could only be done through Jesus Christ.

***so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.***

What was this blessing given to Abraham that all who trust in Christ will receive? The answer is the gift of the Spirit. This is the blessing that all believers experience – (refer again to verses 2 – 5) whose presence in them brings spiritual life and the ability to believe, as he did in Abraham. The Holy Spirit was sent by the risen and ascended Christ. This blessing is given by Jesus Christ through our union with him. The gift is poured out on the Gentiles as well as on the believing Jews.

"These verses provide a crushing refutation of the Galatians who wanted to accept circumcision. If they did so, not only would they then be obliged to obey a whole code of laws which they could not fulfil thus putting themselves under its curse; but, following the law is, in any case, a way that cannot lead to salvation!"

(From a commentary on Galatians by E. P. Sanders.)



## Summary

The Galatian believers had been persuaded by the false teachers to think that they needed to add something else to their faith in Christ in order to be fully accepted by God. They thought that they needed to adopt the Jewish ways practised in the Old Testament. Paul explains very clearly that trying to gain God's favour by becoming a Jew first is not the way. Those who took this position were wrong because Paul sets out so plainly that anyone taking this course of action (trying to obey the law) will be cursed. This approach is so man-centred; it puts the emphasis on what man can do. The problem is that no matter how hard he tries, man is going to fail. He has already failed and is cursed. There is a way out and that is by trusting (faith) in Jesus Christ. He came to earth as a substitute, he became a curse instead of us by hanging on a cross. He bought us out of the slavery of sin (redeemed us) and now we have the Holy Spirit present in us. Paul uses Old Testament quotations to show that man was never in a position to save himself, but always needed help from God.



## A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses (Three sermon outlines)

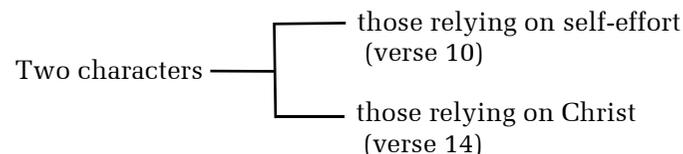
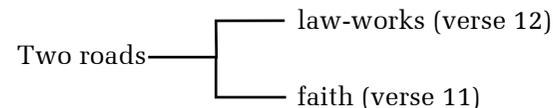
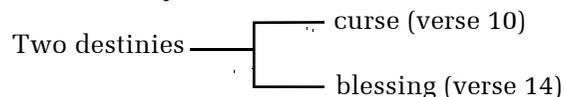
### A. The gospel story

Those under the curse (verse 10): Jews did not keep the Mosaic law fully. Gentiles did not keep the law written on their conscience (Rom. 2:12-16). Therefore both are cursed.

He who was made a curse (verse 13): Only he who was sinless could be made a sinner's substitute. Everyone else is cursed already.

We who are redeemed from the curse (verse 13): the Greek word "redeemed" is a word used of buying slaves out of the market. Believers have been bought by Christ.

### B. Alternative ways of life



Even if it were possible to live a sinless life, one would only obtain a **human** righteousness; but even that isn't possible! We can only receive a curse.

To trust in Christ is to freely obtain the righteousness of **God** (Rom. 3:22). Isn't that the best?

### C. The marks of a true believer (1 Co. 12:3)

1. He or she cannot call Jesus "accursed". Jews who reject Christ as Saviour still disrespectfully call him "the hanged one": i.e. "the cursed one" (Gal. 3:13). No true believer can say so.
2. He or she will be bold to call Jesus "Lord". In an age when the Roman Emperor claimed the title "Lord" for himself, for a believer to call Jesus "Lord" was to risk death. To live as an eager disciple of the Lord Jesus may still cause persecution. Only a true believer will be prepared to do so (Matt. 13:20,21). Loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ is the Spirit-given evidence of true Christianity.



## Focus Point:

### Biblical theology 1

In this and the previous study Paul has used the Old Testament to strengthen his argument against the way the Galatian believers were being misled. Someone may ask why Paul has to do this. Is his case weakening that he has to rely on old writings? Definitely not! Paul is demonstrating to us the importance of understanding the Old Testament through New Testament eyes. People who lived before the coming of Christ had a limited appreciation of the Old Testament. They understood the Old Testament as historical incidents whereas today, not only

do we see these same incidents as facts of history but also God's purposes in his unfolding plan of salvation.

We cannot hope to understand the New Testament without the writings of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is an unfinished story. The New Testament completes the story as far as we need to know. But neither can we make sense of the New Testament without the Old Testament. Jesus often quoted the Old Testament when teaching or answering questions (e.g. Matt.22:32). We must view the Bible as a unified book and realise that there is a story line running through from Genesis to Revelation.

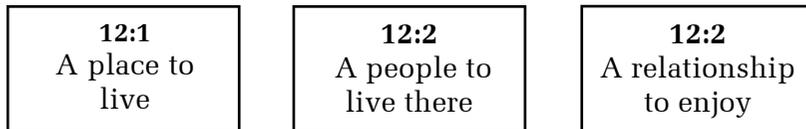
### **The Big Picture** <sup>1</sup>

One of the dangers we face when we're preaching and teaching the Word of God is that we tend to think of the Bible as being made up of lots of different parts – there are 66 books, some of which are narrative, some are poetry, others are prophecy, Gospels, letters and apocalyptic, all written by a variety of human authors. The danger is that we lose sight of the truth that the Bible has one author and that is God who, through his Holy Spirit, inspired the human authors to write the books we have in our Bible. Not only does the Bible have one author, but there's a continuous theme running through the whole of scripture recording God's plan and purpose of salvation. It's good for us, then, to have in mind a big picture of what God is doing as he's at work in the world carrying out his purposes in salvation.

We get God's view on the history of his world if we look together for a moment at Matthew 1:17. These words come at the end of the genealogy of Jesus and show to us the OT history divided into three periods – from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, from the exile to the coming of Jesus. That view helps us to understand the big picture of the Bible.

### **Key to understanding the whole**

The key to God's purpose is found in the promise he made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, where it is summed up in three simple ways – God promises to Abraham and his descendants



<sup>1</sup> This is taken from a manuscript written by Roger Prime for use in a radio programme produced by Grace Baptist Mission called *Serving Today*.

God calls Abraham to go to the land he promises to give him, he promises to make of him a great nation and promises to bless him and make him a blessing to all nations – a promise fulfilled in the coming of Christ and the preaching of the gospel to all nations. Here, then, are the three key things in the purpose of God.

### **A place to live, a people to live there and a relationship with God**

Now, if we go to the account of creation in Genesis 1-3, we see that in his work of creation God made a place to live, a wonderful world and especially the Garden of Eden. God created Adam and Eve to live in the garden, and a relationship to enjoy, as he would meet with them in the garden.

### **Man's fall . . .**

That was, of course all spoilt by sin as Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were shut out from the garden and the presence of God.

### **. . . God's restoration**

God's purpose, however, is to restore men and women into a right relationship with himself – it should not surprise us, then, to discover this promise to Abraham to give a place to live, a people to live there and a relationship to enjoy.

As we trace through the OT history from Abraham to David we see these promises being developed as God makes a great nation out of Abraham's son Isaac, brings the people into the promised land and enters into a covenant with this people as their God. The history of the OT reaches a golden age as God's king David is on the throne; under his reign the people take full possession of the promised land and with the coming of his son Solomon the temple is built in the land as a sign of God's presence among his people. For a moment it might seem the promise of God has been realised, but David falls into the sin of adultery and Solomon's heart is led astray by his many wives. David's reign was never the same after his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, and from that time onwards the nation begins to decline. The books of Kings and Chronicles record the dividing of the nation, the exile of the northern kingdom Israel and then the southern kingdom Judah. The people never believed they'd be removed from the land, but when the Babylonian exile comes it seems as though God's promises have failed – the people have been removed from the land.

Yet, in the ministry of the prophets we see that God's promise is not lost.

- Isaiah looks forward to the return from exile and the city of Jerusa-

lem being renewed – the promise of a place to live remains.

- Jeremiah sees the people being removed from the land – no better than pagans with their uncircumcised hearts – but sees them returning a renewed people with God’s law written in their hearts.
- Ezekiel sees God removing his glory from the land as the people go into exile, but sees the temple being rebuilt as the people are restored to the land – the sign of God’s presence – his book closes with the words *The LORD is there*. A relationship to enjoy.

This return from exile looks forward to the coming of Christ, who through his life, death and resurrection will reverse the effects of the fall and bring to fulfilment all the promises of God (2 Co. 1:20).

- The new place – where once Israel’s hopes were focused on the promised land – now they focus on Jesus.
- The new people – where once the nation was the centre of God’s purpose, now the centre is a person, Jesus Christ, and what counts is being united to him by faith.
- The new relationship – God is present in the person of Jesus; he is Lord and humanity is called to come under his rule, into relationship with him.

#### **A new place to live and enjoy a relationship with God**

Yet God is not finished, for the ultimate goal of history is seen in Revelation 21:1-8 where we find the ultimate fulfilment of God’s promises and purposes in:

- A place to live – the new heaven and earth
- A people to live there – the redeemed people of God from every nation and people – a multitude no-one can count.
- A relationship to enjoy – the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them – no more sin or death or pain – everything made new.

That is the big picture of the purpose of God which can help us to see the Scriptures as a whole and see how the part of Scripture we are teaching fits into the whole.



### Over to you

How do people in your community generally think about getting to heaven? Is it based on something they have to do? If so, how would you use this passage to set before them God’s way?

Paul in these four verses quotes from the Old Testament four times. He brings a New Testament understanding to these passages. How do you view the Old Testament? Just as a historical record of the Jewish nation? Our biblical theology should always make us view the Old Testament with New Testament eyes. Think about this the next time that you are reading in the Old Testament.

Which way have you been leading your people? By the way of the curse or that of the blessing?