CHRIST REDEEMED US

Galatians 3:1–14

Key Verse: 3:13

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.’”

What’s a blessed life? Is it to make great achievements? Is it to be rich? Is it to have fun all the time? The Jews thought the blessed life was to strictly keep God’s laws. But in today’s passage Paul teaches that the blessed life is to live by faith in Christ—especially, faith in his crucifixion. In this study we want to learn how and why only Jesus’ crucifixion can bring us into the blessed life. We especially want to think about what the words “Christ redeemed us” mean. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

As we’ve seen, Paul wrote this letter right after his first missionary journey. He wrote to the new Gentile believers in Galatia. He'd heard that some Jewish Christians had been telling them they needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. So Paul wrote this letter to help them have confidence in their newfound faith. All they needed was the gospel of Jesus, not a system of rules and laws. In chapter 1 we learned that we’re all called to live in the grace of Christ, not in any kind of legalism (1:6). In chapter 2 we learned that in this grace we’re also called to live in fellowship with one another, even though we’re all so different. We also learned what changed Paul, from a legalistic, self-righteous man into somebody who could embrace sinful Gentiles as real brothers and sisters. He said he’d been crucified with Christ. He was no longer full of himself, but full of Jesus. He no longer depended on himself, but depended on Jesus. Most of all, he was sure that Jesus loved him and gave himself for him, and it filled him with this same love to love Gentiles.

In chapter 3 Paul continues presenting his case that in Christ we’re called to live by grace. In this chapter Paul argues his case in many ways. He starts by reminding them of their conversion experience when they heard and believed Christ was crucified (1–5). Next, he introduces the example of Abraham, the actual father of all the Jews (6–9). He goes on to prove from Scripture that trying to live by the law is actually a curse (10–12). Finally, he points us again to the crucifixion of Jesus (13). And he tells us that Jesus redeemed us so that we might have the blessing of Abraham, through the promise of the Spirit (14).

Read verse 1. Paul uses strong language here. It’s not to condemn, but to help these people wake up spiritually. The word “bewitched” is literally “fascinated.” The Galatians had gotten fascinated with a supposedly more spiritual way than simple faith in Jesus. They thought that by keeping the law of circumcision they’d have a more elite status. He said, “Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.” Paul himself had given them the gospel. He told them Jesus was condemned and executed, but God raised him from the dead (Ac13:27–30). He also told them the main point of it all: “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain through the law of Moses” (Ac13:38,39). What good news! The message of the cross can sound like foolishness when we’re immersed in this world (1Co1:18). But the message of the cross powerfully changes people (1Co1:22–24). Paul resolved not to get distracted with other kinds of teaching, but to give people the message of the cross of Jesus (1Co2:2).

Today Christians can still be bewitched to turn away from Jesus crucified, not likely through circumcision, but through trying to be good in other ways, apart from Jesus. There’s the bewitching cultural war some Christians are waging, fighting to legislate some kind of purer society. There are bewitching social causes to fight racism or social injustice, and they only get people fired up and angry, with no solution. Hedonism and materialism bewitch people to turn away from Christ crucified. A fascinating boyfriend or girlfriend can also bewitch us. Actually, it’s the devil, the deceiver, who’s way more clever than us, who can bewitch us with good things to draw us away from the cross of Jesus. We need to ask God every day to keep us near the cross.

Read verse 2. In this verse Paul starts making a very important contrast. Through trying to keep rules and laws, no matter how strictly, we can never receive the Holy Spirit. But when we hear about Jesus’ crucifixion, repent and believe, no matter who we are, whether we’re near to God or far away from him, old or young, God promises to give us the Holy Spirit (Ac2:36–39). The Galatians had experienced the Holy Spirit firsthand. And it wasn’t through trying to keep any rule or law, but through hearing about Christ crucified and believing it. In light of this, Paul rebukes them again. Read verse 3. In verses 2,3 Paul for the first time in this letter mentions the Spirit. Throughout this letter in crucial places he tells us of the Holy Spirit’s role in our Christian life. When we live by the Spirit, we have an intimate love relationship with God (4:6). When we live by the Spirit, we have God’s hope (5:5). When we live by the Spirit, we’re filled with love, joy and peace (5:22). When we live by the Spirit, we invest our lives in meaningful things that please God and bring life (6:8). It can sometimes involve a painful spiritual struggle, but through learning to live by the Spirit, the very character of Jesus is formed in us (4:19; 5:22,23). Paul really didn’t want the Galatians to go backwards, just trying to keep rules and laws (4). Read verse 5. When we believe Christ crucified and receive the Spirit, God works miracles among us (Ac2:43; Heb2:4). It’s the miracle of real change, change in me and in others. It’s the miracle of people’s hardened, sinful hearts melted by the love of God. There’s a huge difference in living by the Spirit or by the law: legalism kills, but the Spirit gives life (2Co3:6b). The most blessed life is to stay near the cross of Jesus and live by the Spirit, not by our sinful nature.

In verses 6–9 Paul turns to quoting Scripture and to the example of Abraham in Genesis. Abraham was the original “lovable loser.” He was an old man unable to have children, so he felt really useless. And he kept on making mistakes: he left the land God called him to and went to Egypt during a famine because he was worried about money; he chronically lied about his wife when he was scared; he got dumped by his clever nephew Lot, who went for the world; he slept with his wife’s servant and created a domestic mess; he enjoyed his son Ishmael for way too long, taking a long spiritual vacation from God. But of all people, such a guy like Abraham became the model of faith for all people. Wow! God didn’t justify Abraham because he was a superhero at doing the works of the law; God justified Abraham simply because he believed God. Abraham had nothing to boast about; he just relied on faith. Abraham shows all people what faith in God really looks like: it’s to hear God’s promises and believe them, even in all my weaknesses, even when it seems impossible. God promised to bless all nations through that one man who had faith. God fulfilled that promise when he sent Jesus through Abraham’s descendants. Like Abraham, when we trust God, who justifies the ungodly, he credits our faith as righteousness (Ro4:4,5).

In verses 10–12 Paul goes on to show from Scripture that trying to live by the law is a curse. But we need some clarification. God’s law isn’t really a curse; it’s a great blessing, because God’s law reveals God’s character and shows us what’s holy, righteous and good (Ro7:12); God's law also helps us see our true selves, how sinful we are (Ro3:20). It’s not ritual or dietary laws, which Jesus fulfilled and did away with; it’s God’s moral laws, seen especially in the Ten Commandments. As believers in Jesus we’re all called to live by God’s moral laws, especially their core principles to love God and love others (Mk12:28–31). But the only way we can live by these principles is by accepting Jesus who was crucified for our sins and gives us the Spirit. Only when the Spirit works in us can the righteous requirement of the law be fully met in us (Ro8:2–4).

Still, Paul says here that those who rely on the works of the law are under a curse (10). How so? Verse 10b reads, “…as it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’” What’s he saying? He means we can’t keep God’s laws here and there, the ones we want, or off and on, sometimes; we have to consistently keep everything. That’s way harder than we would think. James 2:10 says that those who’re guilty of breaking even one of God’s laws are guilty of breaking all of it. All our good record can get erased by one tiny misstep. The law stalks us like the most intense critic, constantly pointing out how we’ve fallen short. So it can make us feel totally defeated and crushed. The law constantly condemns us. So in this sense it’s a curse. Paul goes on in verse 11 to quote from Habakkuk 2:4 to tell us God’s alternative to trying to live by the works of the law; it says that “the righteous will live by faith.” This becomes Paul’s main thesis in the Book of Romans (Ro1:17). The Habakkuk prophecy is further evidence that living by faith is nothing new; it was God’s plan all along.

Finally, Paul points us again to the cross of Jesus. Let’s read verse 13. Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 21:23. It shows us another meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion. Through his crucifixion Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law. How did he do that? Paul says Jesus *became a curse for us*. That’s intense. In other words, Jesus was condemned in our places. He took all the punishment our sins deserve (Isa53:5). It was such a humble and selfless love, to totally sacrifice himself for us. Paul proclaims the good news: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Ro8:1). Through the cross of Christ we’re set free from the curse of the law. We’re also free from the curse on creation (Ge3:16–19; cf. Ro8:20,21). We’re free from the curse of struggling just to survive. We’re free from futility and from cursed desires and ways of thinking. We’re free from feeling like we’re doomed or cursed to be miserable. Christ became a curse for us so that we might be fully and truly blessed.

In verses 13 and 14 Paul repeats that Christ “redeemed us.” To be redeemed means to be bought back. In ancient times this word was used on the slave market. A price had to be paid for a slave to be set free; it was called the redemption price. Just as such a price could be paid for people in slavery, so God bought us at a price, so that we might belong to him as his children (4:5; 1Co6:20; 7:23). The only way we can appreciate that Christ redeemed us is when we experience how miserable it is to be a slave to sin and to many condemning laws. It’s kind of like carrying around a huge debt, and having someone just cancel it. The redemption price for us to belong to God was the shed blood of Jesus (Lk22:20; Ro3:24,25a; Eph1:7; 1Pe1:18,19; Rev5:9). There was no greater cost than the cost of shedding Jesus’ own blood. We need to realize that Jesus shed his own blood to redeem us from our sins and from the law. When we do, we realize there’s no law we need to keep to be right with God.

Read verse 14. What was Abraham’s blessing? Was it becoming famous? Was it the promised land? Was it having many descendants? No. The Bible repeats that Abraham’s greatest blessing was being called God’s friend (Jas2:23; cf. 2Ch20:7; Isa41:8). When we believe in Jesus who was crucified and receive the promised Holy Spirit, we too become God’s friends.

Today we learned that Christ was cursed so that we might be truly blessed. By his grace he fills us with his Spirit, works miracles in our lives and helps us grow as God’s true friends. May God help us hear and believe the message of the cross of Christ. May God also use us to bring people to the cross of Christ so that they may experience his greatest blessing and live a truly blessed life.