**The Cross and the Tomb**

Text: Galatians 3:13

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-15; Luke 23:44-56; Galatians 3:10-14

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 131, 295, 277, 523

**Series:** The Pilgrim’s Progress (#4)

**Confession:** Heidelberg Catechism LD156

**Theme:** On the cross, Christ redeemed those who look to Him in faith from sin.

**Proposition:** Look to Christ in faith for relief, righteousness and security

**Introduction**

‘*The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to that Which is to Come*’ is an allegory of the Christian Life, written in 1678 by John Bunyan. Pilgrim’s Progress is deeply rooted in Scripture and reflects some of the Biblical theology that we confess as a church. Today we’ll see how the character Christian’s experience at the Cross of Christ reflects the teaching of Heidelberg Catechism LD16 which in turn expresses the truth of our text in Galatians 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 hanged on a tree"*.

In this sermon series, we have already seen how Christian left the City of Destruction clothed in rags with a great burden on his back, carrying a book in his hand. He has gone through the Slough of Despond, entered by the Wicket Gate, and been to the House of the Interpreter. Let’s take up the story now, as Bunyan tells it:

*“Now I saw in my dream that the High-way up which Christian was fenced on either side with a Wall, and that Wall is called Salvation. Up this way therefore did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty because of the load on his back.*

*“He ran thus until he came to a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a Cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a Sepulchre. So I saw in my dream that just as Christian came up with the Cross, his Burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the Sepulchre where it fell in, and I saw it no more”.*

The word ‘sepulchre’ is not one that most of us are familiar with, it means *‘a small room or monument, cut in rock or built of stone, in which a dead person is laid or buried*’. Instead of ‘sepulchre’ we would say ‘tomb’, as in the title of this sermon.

Before we go to the Scripture, there is a question that the journey of Christian in The Pilgrim’s Progress raises: Why does he still carry his heavy burden after he has passed through the Wicket Gate (which represents Christ – John 14:6)? Behind what might seem a small detail in the order of events in John Bunyan’s tale, this reflects a very significant point of doctrine. Is it necessary to forsake sin, that is to repent, before coming to Christ in faith? This question was asked of a student for the ministry in Scotland, called William Craig, 29 years after John Bunyan’s death. As a result the so called ‘Marrow Controversy’ arose which had at its heart the matter of salvation by faith alone in Jesus Christ. Without going into all the details here, there are two things to note:

**Firstly**, Bunyan was writing against what we might today call ‘easy believe-ism’ – the idea that a person can think they have saving faith without showing any of the fruits of repentance in their lives.

**Secondly**, the storyline of The Pilgrim’s Progress mirrors John Bunyan’s own personal experience. During a period of 12-16 months, Bunyan was under conviction of sin (especially because of his foul mouth), but he had no assurance that he was a believer. Christian’s journey between the Wicket Gate and the Cross reflects this time of troubling uncertainty.

What can we say? Salvation **is** by faith alone in Christ alone but saving faith is evidenced by the fruits of repentance. Personal assurance often takes some time to strengthen and be experienced in the Christian life. Let’s look now at our text from Galatians 3:13 under three headings:

1. The cross of Christ removes the burden of sin
2. The cross of Christ exchanges sin for righteousness
3. The cross of Christ provides assurance of salvation
4. **The cross of Christ removes the burden of sin**

You may remember that in The Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian was told by Mr Worldly Wiseman that he could have his heavy burden (representing sin) removed with the help of Mr Legality. Later he was shown by the character Interpreter that only grace (and not the Law of God) can sweep clean the human heart. This is the same message that Paul conveys to the Galatians when he writes **‘***Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."*’ (Gal 3:11). That faith is belief in Christ who ‘*redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us- for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree*” (3:13).

The cross is where Christ removed sin and the penalty of death, which is the ‘curse of the law’, from those who look to Him in faith. This is pictured in the Old Testament by the bronze serpent that the Lord instructed Moses to set on a pole so that the Israelites would not die from a snake bite if they looked up at this object. Jesus explained this to Nicodemus, saying: “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*." (John 3:14-15). There is a double meaning here. ‘Lifted up’ refers both to the crucifixion of Christand to His ascension to sit exalted at the right hand of God.

When the character ‘Christian’ came to the cross he was surprised that the sight of this object (a cruel instrument of torture and execution) should relieve him of his heavy burden. As Christian stood looking at the cross and weeping, three ‘Shining Ones’ (angels) came to him, the first saying ‘*thy sins be forgiven thee*’ (Mark 2:5). This explains the loosening of the heavy burden on Christian’s back which then fell off, tumbling down into the tomb; into which it disappeared. Christ redeems people from the curse of the law. His finished work on the cross enables their sins to be forgiven by God. The meaning of the word ‘redeem’ is to ‘buy back’. It was used in Bible times of buying a slave in order to set him or her free.

So there are two aspects to redemption, one for the Redeemer, and one for the redeemed. For the Redeemer, there is a cost: a price to pay. At the cross, the cost of redemption was the life of Christ. Jesus was not the first, nor the last person to be crucified, but His death was no ordinary death. Death is the curse of the law for lawbreakers like you and me. Unlike anyone else who has ever died, Jesus Christ died as a man cursed ‘for us’. Paul expresses this sacrificial substitution in 2 Cor 5:21 “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin*”. God the Father placed the sins of all His people on His beloved Son who bore His righteous wrath. This makes the death of Jesus utterly unique; never having happened before and never to happen again.

The Heidelberg Catechism explains it this way: “*This death convinces me that he shouldered the curse which lay on me, since death by crucifixion was accursed by God*” (A39). The inexpressible, unimaginable pain of this humanly unbearable burden which fell on Christ is beyond words. Luke records what took place that day in the Creation. “*It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour*”. From about midday until 3p.m. there was no light from the sun. Perhaps we could say that Christ died 144,000 deaths that day. To use the symbolic number (Rev 14:1) representing all of God’s people for whom He became a curse. For Christ the Redeemer, there was a great cost to remove the burden of sin from many.

For the redeemed, He purchased their freedom. He set them free. Brothers and sisters, Jesus died so that we can truly live. John Bunyan beautifully pictures this exchange as the heavy burden, representing sin, falls from Christian’s back and tumbles down into a tomb to be seen no more. David expresses God’s gracious removal of sin in these words: “*as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us*” (Ps 103:12).

Bunyan writes of Christian’s glad, emotional, tearful response in these words: *“Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a merry heart, ‘He has given me rest by His sorrow, and life by His death.’ Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder, for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the Cross should thus ease him of his Burden. He went, therefore, and looked again, even till the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his cheeks.”*

The ‘sepulchre’, or tomb, that Bunyan describes represents both the death of sin for the redeemed and also the death of Christ, the Redeemer. Luke records how the dead body of Jesus was placed out of sight in a tomb, where it would have been expected to have remained. “*Then he (Joseph of Arimathea) took it (Christ’s body) down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid*” (Luke 23:53). The Heidelberg Catechism, following Scripture, explains why Jesus had to die. “*Because God’s justice and truth demand it: only the death of God’s Son could pay for our sin*” (A40).

When Christian saw the cross, he saw, by faith, the person and work of Christ, the One who redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. Have you too seen the cross of Christ? Have you looked in faith to Jesus to remove your burden of sin, guilt and shame so that you can be truly free in Christ who was lifted up as a cursed man so that you are no longer under the curse of the law? At the Cross, Christ removed the burden of sin from many people, but there is more! Which brings us to our second point:

1. **The cross of Christ exchanges sin for righteousness**

In the Pilgrim’s Progress, the second of the three Shining Ones stripped Christian of his rags and clothed him with a change of ‘raiment’. The old English word ‘raiment’ is not used much today. It refers to formal clothing and comes from the Old French word *areer* or "to array," which describes dressing in decorative clothing, or adorning yourself in the very best attire. In times past, people would ‘dress up’ to attend a church worship service in a church building like this. Their clothing could be described as their ‘raiment’.

Today, many people wear the same clothes to attend a worship service as they do in day-to-day life. Some will say, “*it’s not what you wear on the outside that is important, but what is in your heart*”. That is true. Yet we do tend to dress up for special occasions like weddings. For me, each Lord’s Day is a special occasion. It is not just like any other day. It has been set apart by decree of God Himself. I can reflect that reality in what I wear. So can you 😊

In The Pilgrim’s Progress, John Bunyan is reflecting the imagery of Zechariah 3 where Joshua the High Priest, representing God’s people, is accused by Satan. He is clothed with filthy garments which are then removed, an angel explaining: ‘*Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments*’ (Zech 3:4-5). The ‘raiment’ of Joshua in Scripture, and that of Christian in The Pilgrim’s Progress, represents the righteousness of Christ which replaces the unrighteousness of a sinner when they look to Christ for salvation.

You may know that this symbolic redressing of Joshua was reflected in early church practice in the 1st two centuries when elaborate preparations were made for new believers who were to be baptised and to profess their faith publicly. They were called ‘catechumens’. They received biblical instruction, they fasted, and they were carefully questioned by the church leadership to ensure that they knew in whom they believed. At Easter time these catechumens were led to a small pool enclosed by curtains. They entered the water naked, leaving behind their old garments, and they were baptised. Afterwards they were anointed with oil and clothed in fresh white linen garments, reflecting those who ‘*have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*’ (Rev 7:9-17).

This early church baptism and profession of faith practice portrayed the redressing of Joshua the High Priest, vividly picturing justification (‘just as it I had not sinned’) before God. Paul writes to the Galatians about justification: ‘*Now it is evident that no one is**justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."*’ (Gal 3:11). Notice that Joshua and Christian do not do anything. It is the angel who is instructed to “take off his filthy clothes”. It is the Lord who explains the significance “*behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you*” (Zech 3:4). It is the Lord who gives Joshua new clean garments and dresses him in them. Joshua, like Christian in The Pilgrim’s Progress does absolutely nothing! This is a profound picture of purifying, saving, grace.

Here is the comfort of the good news of the Bible. No filthy personal history is beyond the reach of God’s redemptive work in justification. Justification is helpfully defined in the Westminster Shorter Catechism (33) as ‘*an act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight only for Christ imputed to us and received in faith alone*’. You may know that John Bunyan was not only the author of The Pilgrim’s Progress, but also of another work entitled ‘*Justification by Imputed Righteousness*’.

Bunyan was greatly blessed by reading good Christian literature. This is a helpful practice and discipline for all of us, brothers and sisters. That is why we have a church library! So that we too can benefit from the writing of faithful believers like Bunyan and Luther. It was Martin Luther’s commentary on Galatians which gave Bunyan a clearer understanding of the central Biblical doctrine of justification. Bunyan wrote “*I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians (excepting the Holy Bible) before all the books that ever I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience*”.

As Christian looked to the cross of Christ in faith, a great exchange took place. His burden of sin, shame and guilt was removed, setting him free because that burden had been placed on Christ who was ‘*made to be sin who knew no sin*” (2 Cor 5:21). Christian’s unrighteousness was taken away from him. Then the righteousness, the holiness, purity, obedience and perfection of Christ was credited to his account so that He appeared before God as though He was a fully faithful son. This is God’s sovereign work of justification in which a person, by faith, receives ‘*the righteousness of God*’ (2 Cor 5:21b). This is the meaning of Paul’s quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 “*The righteous shall live by faith*”.

Have you seen the cross of Christ? Do you live by faith in the Son of God who lived a perfect life of willing obedience on your behalf so that even though you are a lawbreaker, God the Father sees you as a law-keeper in Christ? Justification by faith is very good news, because not only is it the way in which God saves people, it is also the reason why we can have confidence that we are, and will remain, in the state of salvation. This brings us to our third point.

1. **The cross of Christ provides assurance of salvation**

As we’ve already heard, John Bunyan’s personal struggle with assurance of salvation is reflected in the journey of Christian in The Pilgrim’s Progress; especially his carrying of a heavy burden between the Wicket Gate and the Cross. In John Bunyan’s journey of faith, the day finally came when the great doctrine of imputed righteousness brought him into spiritual liberty and profound joy. Theologian and prolific writer Joel Beeke has helpfully said “*Bunyan saw with the eyes of his heart that the living Christ was his righteousness, not his own works, and his heart rested upon Christ and found peace*”.

It is not possible to find true peaceful assurance of salvation if you believe that your deliverance from sin and death is based upon anything other than the completed work of Christ on the cross for you. In the Pilgrim’s Progress, the third of the three Shining Ones set a mark on Christian’s forehead, and gave him a roll with a seal upon it. The significance of this sealed roll is reflected in Ephesians 1:13 “*In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit*”. The sealed scroll in Christian’s hand represents his assurance of salvation; the guarantee that is confirmed by the indwelling within the believer of the Holy Spirit. He is the seal.

Remember that Christian’s burden rolled down into the Tomb. The empty tomb of Jesus is the guarantee that God the Father has accepted the payment that Jesus made for all the sins of all His people, including, brothers and sisters, all mine and all yours! That is why Jesus was raised to life and He left the tomb, being resurrected and going ahead of all those who follow him, ahead to prepare a place for them (John 14:3).

When later, Christian is negligent and temporarily lost the scroll on the Hill Difficulty, his journey became much harder until he found it again. This temporary loss reflects the subjective experience that believers may feel at times that their salvation is in doubt. If you are still troubled by an unsettled conscience despite having come to Christ in repentance and faith, be comforted by these true words from the Westminster Confession of Faith (18:3): *“This infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith but that a true believer may wait long and contend with many difficulties before he partakes of it”.*

Christian had a life-changing experience when he saw the cross, just as the Israelites of old did when they looked at the bronze snake on a pole and lived, despite having been bitten and poisoned with deadly venom. What was Christian’s response to the cross of Christ? He gave ‘three leaps of joy and went on singing’:

“*Thus far did I come laden with my sin,*

*Nor could anything else ease the grief that I was in,*

*Until I came here. What place is this!*

*Must here be the beginning of my bliss?*

*Must here the burden fall off from my back?*

*Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?*

*Blest Cross! Blest Sepulchre! Blest, rather, be*

*The Man that there was put to shame for me!*”.

As the Apostle Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians, he writes “*But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*” (Gal 6:14).

Have you seen the cross of Christ? Is this your boast? Is this the source of your confidence, strength and hope? Has the world been crucified to you and you to the world? Brothers, sisters, friends, look to Christ in faith for relief, righteousness and security. He will set you on the right path that leads to eternal life in the Celestial City, the New Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God with man (Rev 21:3).

AMEN.