The righteous curse of God

Text: Galatians 3:10-14

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 27:15-26; 21:22-23; Isaiah 53:4; Galatians 3:10-14

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 302, 49, 71, 309, 522

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD4)

**Theme:** The righteous curse of God on those who break His law

**Proposition:** Praise God for His justice and mercy in Christ!

**Introduction**

A curse can be an offensive word or phrase used to express anger or annoyance. It can be a wish expressed, with the mouth, that some form of difficulty, misfortune, or even death would befall someone. The Mosaic civil law for Old Testament Israel revealed the seriousness of curses: “*Whoever curses his father or his mother must be put to death*” (Ex 21:17). Balak the king of Moab commanded the pagan prophet Balaam to curse Israel, but instead he obeyed God and blessed them instead. Goliath cursed David for challenging him with a sling (1 Sam 17:43). Natural fallen mankind is described in Romans chapter 3 as having mouths ‘*full of curses and bitterness*’ (v14, quoting Ps 10:7).

Cursing by people like you and me is almost always unrighteous, but with God when He curses, His words are always righteous because He is. A divine curse in Scripture is a ‘solemn utterance’ by God which invokes harm on someone or something. There was no curse before our first ancestors rebelled against God. It was only after their sin that God invoked His righteous curse both on them and on their earthly environment. After the Fall, God said to Adam: “*Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’* ***cursed*** *is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life*” (Gen 3:17). Because of Adam’s sin God would do harm to the good land so that it would no longer readily produced food as it had in the originally created world which was ‘very good’. So if you ever say ‘cursed weeds’ whilst gardening, you are speaking Biblical truth – assuming that you are not trying to curse the weeds yourself!

Sin resulted in God’s curse as the HCA9 explains in these words: “*God created man with the ability to keep the law. Man, however, tempted by the devil, in reckless disobedience, robbed himself and his descendants of these gifts*”. That is the gifts of righteousness and holiness. When God curses a person, He always does so justly because He is never unfair. There is nothing worse than being cursed by God because He is all-powerful. This is the truth expressed in Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 10: ‘*Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?*’ - ‘*Certainly not. He is terribly angry about the sin we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit. As a just judge he punishes them now and in eternity. He has declared: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law”*’.

These last words are from Deuteronomy 26:26 which is quoted in our text in Galatians 3:10-14. As we focus on the righteous curse of God from this text, we’ll do so under three headings:

1. The mountain of curses
2. The man who became a curse
3. The God who is just and merciful
4. **The mountain of curses**

Mount Ebal rises almost 1000 m above sea level. Together with its twin peak Mount Gerizim, it is situated west of the Jordan river, about 60 kms north of the city of Jerusalem. This was the area where Abraham had built an altar (Gen 12:6-7), as had Jacob later (Gen 33:18-20). Joseph’s bones were buried there (Josh 24:32). As Moses’ last sermon (in the book of Deuteronomy) draws to a close, He was preparing his listeners for a future ceremony. He would not be a part of this event himself. Instead he would die without ever walking on the promised land that he had been used by the Lord to prepare his people for.

You can read about how Joshua faithfully conducted the covenant renewal ceremony on the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim in Joshua 8:30-35. This solemn ceremony was designed to motivatethe people of Israel to be law-keepers; to be faithful to their covenant obligations to the Lord who had delivered them from their slavery in Egypt into freedom in the Promised Land. Six of the twelve tribes (Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali) would ‘*stand on Mt Ebal for the curse*’. The Levites would then declare, in a loud voice, twelve curses so that all the people would hear them. When God pronounces a curse, it is His righteous judgement on sin. To be cursed is to be despised, doomed, devoted to destruction.

The twelve curses listed in 27:15-26 have secrecyas their common theme. They are directed against individuals, rather than the nation as a whole. They reflect the ten commandments and other aspects of the Mosaic law. They deal with honouring parents, moving property markers, misleading the blind, perverting justice for the vulnerable, sexual sins, violence, and bribery. The twelfth curse is a summary of them all: “*Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.”* (Deut 27:26). After each of the curses is pronounced, all the people were to say ‘Amen.’ By saying ‘Amen’ the people confirmed that they had heard, understood, and were in agreement with these covenant curses. Doing so removed any possible excuse for any unfaithfulness in their conduct just as signing a legal agreement binds a person to the terms and conditions listed within.

Now we might think that God’s curse only applies to Old Testament Israel with whom He entered into a special covenant relationship, promising them blessings if they obeyed Him (e.g. Deut 28:1-14) but curses if they disobeyed Him. However, the curse of God on lawbreakers extends to all people descended from Adam. Whilst Old Testament Israel uniquely had the ceremonial and civil laws given to them by God, the moral law has been given to everyone. This Law of God is ‘*written on the hearts*’ (Rom 2:15) of every human being. No matter how much or how little an individual’s conscience is seared, we are all moral creatures being made in God’s image. This truth is reflected in the proverbial saying ‘*honour among thieves*’ meaning that even criminals observe a moral code in that they do not do anything illegal to their partners in crime.

There is a ‘mountain of curses’ which stand against every descendant of Adam because each of us are lawbreakers. In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul quotes the summary curse from Deuteronomy 27:26 and then writes: ‘*Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law*’ (Gal 3:11a). No one descended from Adam is exempt from the curse of God because everyone, Jews and non-Jews, breaks God’s law. One of the difficulties that many people have in accepting the gospel is that they see themselves as being ‘a good person’, or at least ‘not too bad’. They might even say things like ‘*I am a law-abiding citizen. I pay my taxes, I’ve never been convicted of any crimes, I even keep to the speed limit when I drive and always get a building permit if one is required by law*’. These responses miss the vital truth that we are all breakers of God’s perfect law, in thought, word and deed. We are therefore all naturally cursed by God, but as the Heidelberg Catechism answer 11 reminds us, ‘*God is certainly merciful just as he is also just*’ which brings us to our second point.

1. **The man who became a curse**

Jesus Christ, the Beloved Son of God, unlike any other human being, never broke God’s law. He lived on this earth honouring, loving, and willingly submitting to His Heavenly Father. Yet on the cross He became a curse for each one of God’s people – as Paul explains to the Galatians, quoting from Deuteronomy 21:23 “*cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree*”. To be hung, suspended, between heaven and earth symbolised abandonment by both and makes the statement that dead person was not worthy of either. There was no greater shame for a person in the ancient world than for their body to be hung like this.

The body of Jesus was not hung on a wooden cross **after** He was murdered, but nailed there when He was still alive - to die slowly and painfully and shamefully in full public view. Under Roman rule, the Jews were not normally permitted to execute anyone (John 18:31) so they had taken Jesus to the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate who asked what charge they brought against Him. Their answer was deceitful, cunning, and without any justice: “*If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you*” (John 18:30). Pilate gave the crowds what they said they wanted – crucifixion for Christ – and he publicly washed his hands before them saying “*I am innocent of this man’s blood*” (Matt 27:24). He lied. The guilty murderous crowd said, “*His blood be on us and on our children*” (Matt 27:25).

Christ, the One by whom, and for whom all things were created (Col 1:16), including forests and individual trees, was hung on a cross; a wooden instrument of torture and death fashioned by sinful men. Christ was publicly shamed, His bloody, bruised, and likely naked body exposed for all to see. The prophet Isaiah wrote of this, saying that *“He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him”* (Isa 53:2b-3).Passers by the cross wagged their heads, abusing Him (Matt 27:39) “*save Yourself, and come down from the cross*”. The chief priests, scribes, elders mocked Him (Matt 27:41). “*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief*” (Isa 53:3).

The law is a curse to those who fail to obey it (Gal 3:10). Yet Christ Himself was perfectly obedient to the law, but He bore the sin of others, becoming a curse for them. “*He was smitten by God and afflicted*” (Isa 53:4). According to the law in Deuteronomy chapter 21, after the dead body of a cursed criminal had hung on a tree, it was to be buried the same day. The Hebrew in Deut 21:23 is emphatic ‘*Be* ***sure to*** *bury him*’. So, it was that the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross and buried on the same day as his crucifixion – that first ‘black Friday’. Jesus had received the death penalty. He had been cursed and hung ‘on a tree’. He covered the sins of many with His shed blood. Brothers and sisters in our Lord “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us*”. He was cursed that we might be blessed with the mercy of God, which brings us to our third point.

1. **The God who is just and merciful**

When Jesus said on the cross ‘*it is finished*’ (John 19:30), He spoke about the end of His life, but more, He spoke about the completion of His mission. Jesus had become a curse for all of God’s people. He had been fatally harmed by His Heavenly Father on behalf of people like us. He had been cursed by God’s righteous curse. We cannot fully comprehend the pain, torment and isolation of this divine curse on the Son of God. Jesus conveyed His anguish in these words quoted from Psalm 22 “*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*”. The righteous justice of God had been fully satisfied on behalf of all His people.

Jesus died as the only truly innocent human being ever to have lived. He is a perfectly righteous man. That is why the grave could not hold Him. Today, on the first day of the week, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ. This is the most powerful sign both of the justice and mercy of God. The sign that His justice has been satisfied at the cross. The sign that His mercy is extended to all those who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

Paul writes to the Galatians and presents the pure gospel to them saying “*The righteous shall live by faith*” (Gal 3.11), here echoing Habakkuk 2.4. The foolish Galatians were being led astray by a false gospel of faith plus obeying Old Testament ceremonial law equals salvation. Being right with God comes through being justified by faith **alone**. Faith being the means, or instrument, by which the perfect work of Christ is credited to the account of the justified sinner. Christ received the penalty of death due to all lawbreakers.

People like you and me are justified by faith – true faith which believes that he stood in our place on that cross and that His perfect obedience to the law is credited to us as though it were ours. All those justified in Christ have eternal life and the curse of God has been removed from them forever. Because, as descendants of Adam, we are naturally conceived under God’s curse, these perishable bodies we have now cannot inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor 15:50). We need new imperishable bodies for the fullness of eternal life. It is because of God’s perfect justice and mercy through the completed work of His Son that we can be certain that we will be resurrected to new life, just as surely as Jesus rose from the grave on the third day.

Are you certain that Jesus rose from the grave having suffered under the righteous curse of God on your behalf? If so, then your faith in Christ means that you are eternally blessed. If not, then do not remain under the curse of God, but come to Jesus in repentance and faith and receive His bountiful blessings. Brothers and sisters in our Lord “*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain*” (1 Cor 15:56-58). Praise God for His justice and mercy in Christ! AMEN.