

From Curse to Blessing

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 31st of August 2003. The preacher is Paul Dudley. His sermon is entitled From Curse to Blessing and is based on Galatians chapter 3 verses 1 to 18.

There are rules everywhere we go. I went to the Sydney versus Melbourne game yesterday. Go Sydney.

And I was invited by a member of the MCC, the Melbourne Cricket Club, and he took me through the lovely buildings that are about to be demolished. And he pointed out there was a long room there that I was not allowed to enter.

The rule was even though I had a little pink tag, I could not go in that room. But if I was able to go in that room, I wouldn't be able to go in that day because I didn't have a tie on. There are rules there that are unbelievable.

If you're under 18, you can't go anywhere near this building. There are rules everywhere we go. Did you know in Oklahoma, I think it's Oklahoma, that it's illegal, there is a rule that you are not allowed to give alcohol to a goldfish.

[1 : 3 1] In Singapore, you are not allowed to chew gum. In Australia, if you go over 5km over the speed limit, even if you are going to the church's annual dinner, you'll get hit with \$125 and one point taken off your driver's licence.

I know that for a fact. There are many rules all around us. Many see Christianity as a whole lot of set of rules, do's and don'ts.

That's what Christianity is all about, people think. It's about doing and don'ting. Many Christians actually live that way too. Many Christians live by doing and don'ting.

Paul wants to stand up and argue against that. From chapter 1, we've seen that a group of false teachers, Judaizers, have infiltrated the church of Galatia, a church back in the time of Paul, and have argued for the importance of rules in the Christian life.

They've said you can't have a relationship with God just as you are. Now, you must do something to be worthy of it. You must be circumcised.

[2 : 5 3] You must observe special food regulations and special days. Basically, you need to observe the rules and regulations which Moses laid down in the Old Testament.

This is the way that you can be a part of God's people. They're coming into the church and telling them, these young Christians, this is how you have a relationship with God.

Paul calls this doing. Doing the law, he calls it works of the law. The idea of doing the law, works of the law.

And Paul is arguing against that this theology of rules that they have is not the way to have a relationship with God. This group of coming in, these false teachers, they're saying that you need to do the works of the law so that you can earn the right to have a relationship with God.

You need to do the law. You need to do these things so that you can come and be a part of the people of God. So you can be a Jew.

- [3 : 56] You need to come and be circumcised. You need to do the works of the law so that you can maintain your relationship with God.
- If you want to stay in a relationship with God, you've got to do. That's how you'll stay there. You don't do, you're going to fall away. Well, we've been looking at this over the last couple of talks on Galatians.
- Paul now turns to the Galatians with this problem. His formal arguments start today from chapter 3 verse 1. And he has three main arguments in tonight's passage that we're going to look at.
- And he's trying to convince the Galatians that a key to a relationship with God, it's not with rules, but faith. You want to have a relationship with God, it's with faith.
- And notice the urgency at which he starts. You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? You idiots!
- [5 : 01] What are you doing? Are you crazy? Notice the way he starts here with such urgency. Paul starts with such...
- He wants to make this very clear to them, that this is an important message. They've got to get it through. Because their very relationship with God is at stake.
- These young Christians, their relationship with God is at stake because they are turning away from the way they began. And that's the first argument that he puts forward here in verses 1 through to 5.
- The argument of looking back to their past experience. Looking back to the way that they became a Christian. It was great tonight having the three up here talking about the way they became a Christian. Paul starts his argument in chapter 3 by getting the Galatians to reflect back a little bit.
- Just think back to when I came to you at Galatia. Think back when I, as verse 1 says, came before you and preached Christ crucified. When I told you the gospel message.
- [6 : 12] Think back to then. Think about how, when I brought you that message, the Holy Spirit came upon you. And as verse 5 we see there, talks about, talks about how the way that the Holy Spirit did these great workings of miracles.
- The great things that were happening in their lives. Think back to that time, Paul says. Think back. He gets them to think back by asking them questions.
- Look at verse 2. The only thing I want to learn from you is this. Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish?
- Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Paul starts asking all these questions. Verses 1 to 5 is all these questions. Think back. Think back to the way you began. Did you start with doing all these good works and as a prize God goes, well done.
- You've done very well. Doing all these things and as a prize, here, have the Holy Spirit. Well done. No, he doesn't say that.
- [7 : 20] It was a gift of God. It was when they believed, as it says there in verse 2, by believing what you heard. That's how they received the Holy Spirit.
- By believing, not by doing. No wonder he calls them foolish. A daft bunch who were dumb to think that they would be blessed after gaining so much at the beginning.
- Then they could go on and try and gain more blessing from God by doing. They've already got so much. Being given the Holy Spirit, such a great blessing, such a great gift.

But now they want to go back to doing things, thinking that that might actually earn something more from God. In verse 4, he then goes on to talk about, did you experience so much for nothing? The way that it could be read there, it may imply that, did you experience so much suffering for nothing?

When we look back in Acts, Paul suffered for being a Christian. He was almost stoned to death for being a Christian. He suffered a great deal at the hands of the Jews.

[8 : 28] Paul is saying, did you suffer so much at the beginning of your Christian life from these Jewish people? Only now, after suffering so much, now are you going to join them?

Was all that suffering for nothing? Suffering for nothing. Well, the Galatians are in danger of thinking that they could gain more from a life of bondage to the law than a life of freedom in the spirit.

And Paul wants to point out this by looking at their experience as early Christians. Paul says to them, have you learnt nothing at all? The way you started was by grace, a gift.

Do you think you can now earn some more blessing by doing? How foolish. The first point that we see in verses 1-5 is Christian experience teaches that a relationship with God is not by rules but by faith.

In verses 6 through to 14, Paul then argues from scripture. Paul then starts going back into the Old Testament and starts pointing out that this is not the way that it was intended.

[9 : 46] It's actually a very shrewd tactical move. In verses 6 through to 9, he actually looks at the example of Abraham. This is very smart thinking.

A great tactical move. Because for these false teachers coming in, Abraham would have been one of their great heroes. He would have been just as highly regarded almost as much as Moses.

He was one of the great patriarchs, the father of Israel. And so Paul here is using this man that they probably would have argued for, he actually uses it for his arguments.

He allows the categories that the opponents, Paul's false teachers that have come in, he uses some of their categories to actually argue against them. You can imagine Paul's opponents coming, do you want to be sons of Abraham?

We heard the promises in Genesis chapter 12 of being a part of Abraham's family, of having these great promises of being a part of God's family, enjoying great blessings.

[10 : 49] If you want to be like them, you can imagine these false teachers saying, well then come and be circumcised. Because that's what Abraham did. He was circumcised, he circumcised his son.

Come and do these things like Abraham did. This is the way that you're going to be able to enjoy and be a part of God, Abraham's family, enjoy these great blessings. But Paul says, no, no, no, no.

Go back and have a look at Genesis, Paul says, when he starts quoting. Look there in verse 6. Paul quotes from Genesis chapter 15, verse 6.

Just as Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. How did Abraham enjoy a special relationship with God? In chapter 15 it tells us, verse 6, that Abraham, this is of Genesis, that he enjoyed this relationship by faith.

It was reckoned to him by faith. This idea of righteousness as we looked at last time, this idea of being declared right with God, of having this right standing before God, of being declared innocent, Abraham was declared innocent, had this right standing before God, not because he went and circumcised himself.

[12 : 07] That happens in chapter 17. Chapter 15, he enjoys that relationship there by faith. Now we need to be careful here.

It would be easy to sort of say, oh, it's his faith that's credited him. It says there reckoned, the idea of being credited or, you know, earned, that because he had all this faith, God says, well done, because you've got so much faith, here, have some righteousness.

No, no, no, no. This idea of reckoned is the idea that God gives us a gift. It's not because he had so much faith that God gave it to him.

It's a gift of God, an undeserved, divine generosity. When we're going through college, we didn't have much money.

It was often a struggle trying to get through college. Michelle and I was studying at theological college and Michelle, she wasn't working because she was looking after the kids. We had two at that point.

[13 : 15] And I remember coming up to Christmas and very little money and we woke up one morning to find an envelope at our door. a gift, a gift of \$500.

We didn't deserve it. I hadn't gone out and earned that money. It wasn't as though I was this particularly great guy that deserved all this money. I don't know who it is to this day who dropped that money at the door.

But we just received this gift of \$500. The gift that Abraham received of righteousness, of a right standing before God, it is a gift, an undeserved gift, a gift from God.

But notice after verse 6 that this gift of justification, this gift of being declared right before God, it is not just for him.

It is actually a plan for everyone who believes like him. Look in verse 7. So you see, those who believe are descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, all the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.

[14 : 28] For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. You see, these false teachers who are coming in saying, if you want to be a part of God's family, you want to be a part of Abraham's family, then come and be circumcised because that will make you a Jew, that will make you a part of Abraham's family.

But Paul is saying, no, no, no, no, you've got it all wrong. You want to be a part of God's family, a part of Abraham's descendants, then be like Abraham, a man of faith, a man who trusted God.

That is the way that you enjoy the great blessings of God. That is the way that you enjoy the righteousness that declared right, that idea of being justified. Here we see Abraham as an example of someone who trusted God, who had faith in God, had faith not only in God but God's word and his promises.

Abraham trusted in those promises. He trusted that God would bring them about. He trusted in the promises. And as a result, God declared him righteous.

Well, there's the next part of Paul's argument, the argument from the example of Abraham, that you do not have a right relationship with God by rules but by faith.

[15 : 50] Well, in verses 10 through to 14, we have the next argument that Paul gives, the argument from the inevitability of human moral failure. That is, that if you actually want to go down the path of law and rules, it's only going to bring a curse upon you.

And he does this by using three passages. He uses these three pivotal passages, very carefully picked passages. A master stroke by himself of picking these passages, showing from within the law itself how the law brings curse, not blessing.

So, look in verse 10. Verse 10, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy chapter 27. Now, Deuteronomy chapter 27, verse 26, is this great moment in Deuteronomy where Moses is giving the curses.

He's giving his final sermon before Israel go into the promised land. And before they're about to go in, he gives this list of curses. And at the end of the curses, it says this, Cursed is anyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.

There it is there. Here is the argument that Paul is using. If you sit under law, well then, you've got to obey the whole law.

[17 : 13] See, implicit in this verse 10 is the argument that if you want to go and live the way of the law, well then, the law demands 100% obedience.

Not 50%, which is good if you're doing English or some other subject, but 100% obedience to the law. But not only 100% obedience, 100% of the time.

Not just obedience for a little bit of it, but the whole part. If you want to live by the law, well then you're going to have to sit right under it and live by it 100% of the time.

Implicit into what Paul is saying here is you can't do it. It is utterly unattainable and therefore a curse comes upon you.

in verse 11 he gives the count of that. This side we have living by the law and being cursed by the law.

[18 : 19] In verse 11 he gives the other side. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law for the one who is righteous will live by faith. Here he quotes Habakkuk.

Now I don't know if you've read the minor prophet Habakkuk, but he's in the Old Testament there and he lived in a period of a divine judgment. It was a time when Israel was about to be judged by God for the things that they were doing.

But Habakkuk brings out this little bit of hope. The possibility that one day the keeping of the law in the future will be done. It will be given freely bestowed on people because they will put their trust in God.

And so Habakkuk writes these words that the one who is righteous will live by faith. That's the hope that Habakkuk had for the future.

It was by trusting God and he looked forward to that hope. In verse 12 we go back to the other side again, that idea of the law and about the doing and he this time quotes from Leviticus a book full of laws.

[19 : 26] Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5 backs up again the idea of doing. Look in verse 12 but the law does not rest on faith but on the contrary whoever does the works of the law will live by them.

It's living by the law. You have to do it all the time. In this verse there is implicit perhaps the idea that you might be able to attain life from God if you're able to do it 100% of the time and you're able to do it 100%.

But again there is this idea that because of our moral failings there is no way we are able to do it. Paul makes it clear in verses 10, 11 and 12 quoting back in scripture that scripture itself says that the way of law is the way of curse but the way of faith is the way of God's promises.

They are mutually exclusive as a way of righteousness. A way of having a relationship with God is not through the law but through the promises of God through trusting in them through having faith in them.

Why do we have the law then? Why does God give us this law? Why did he give it to the Israelites back then? Well I'm not going to answer that today because that's not in the passage.

[20 : 50] That comes next week. Come next week and hear about why the law is there. But note here today what Paul is saying. You want to be put in a right relationship with God? You can't do it through the law.

You can't do it through the doing. Because through the doing comes curse. And so we have this collision don't we? On one side the law and here we have faith.

It just seems so exclusive. They want to clash don't they? They want to come together. It's like this murky mess that we have. What's going to happen when they come together?

Well they do come together in verse 13 and 14. Like a ray of sunshine at this game at the Swans. It was a very typical Melbourne day. I was sitting there in the stands, the members stands, and overlooking the match.

It was just magnificent. But during the game it became very dull and dark. The wind was blowing. It was starting to rain. It was dreary.

[21 : 55] As we look at these verses it feels a bit that way, doesn't it? It's so heavy. All these passages from the Old Testament. We've got the curse and the promise. It's all this dreariness. What's going to happen?

But in verse 13 there's this clarity. It's like the game yesterday. All of a sudden the sun would break through in typical four season weather in one day of Melbourne. The sun broke through in the game and you could see everything so clearly.

particularly when Sydney won. It was just this clearness, this sharpness to everything. The dreariness was sort of taken from your eyes and you could see everything so much clearly as the players were running around.

In verse 13 and 14 here we come the two together. here we see a moment of clarity.

into the argument comes Christ abruptly. There's no warning of this. Christ comes into the argument and here we see that Christ becomes the curse for us.

[23 : 11] This curse that we're talking about, the demands of the law, the doing of the law, our failings in that, Christ takes upon himself so that we can enjoy the promises.

And the promises and the curse come together at the cross on the tree. There we see Christ taking on behalf of his people, submitting himself to the curse, bringing us into our relationship with God.

These two verses are in many ways the heart of the letter to the Galatians. They are great verses. Well, Paul has argued in these verses that we've seen so far in verses 6 through to 14, that as we look through the Old Testament, even the Old Testament screams out that you cannot obtain blessing from God through doing.

It is not through doing but faith. Well, the third argument that he uses comes in verses 15 through to 18. And in many ways it's actually an example that Paul gives.

It's an example of a human contract, how human contracts work. So, he takes a bit of an example of the things that he sees around him, those of contracts or wills.

[24 : 38] I've entered in a few contracts myself. I have my wedding vows that I have made with Michelle. There are all sorts of other contracts that we make. I guess the one that comes to mind most clearly in helping us understand what is written in verses 15 through to 18 is that of a contract that you sign when buying a house.

I've never had the privilege of buying a house or the stress of buying a house at the moment. God willing one day I might. But my understanding of it is until you sign and exchange contracts everything's up for grabs.

You can pull out of the agreement if you want. But as soon as those contracts have been swapped signed, there is no pulling out. It's very, very difficult. The contracts have been signed.

Paul uses this example. Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life. Once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it.

Once you've got a contract, once you've got a will, someone's will, once you've got this contract of signing a house, you can't change it, you can't annul it, it's there.

[25 : 51] Paul uses this in relationship to the promise or the covenant that God made with Abraham, that great promise, the promise of life and of blessing.

Look in verse 16, now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. Paul is saying here they can't be changed. Look down in verse 17, my point is this, the law which came 430 years later does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God so as to annulify the promise.

Paul is making the point here that the promise that God made, this covenant that God made, even though the law came later on, it doesn't change this covenant. This way of relating to God, the law that came 430 years later, it doesn't change it, it can't change it.

Again, the question asks, how do we understand the law? Why was it given? That's next week. The point tonight is promise through faith.

The law does not change it. You cannot have a relationship going through the doing, Paul is saying. That's the first thing.

[27 : 06] The covenant with Abraham represents God's pristine and irrevocable will. But the second thing there that we have, in particular in verse 16, is that the promises that God has actually have a single person in mind.

Seems a bit odd, doesn't it? Have a look at verse 16. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, and to his offsprings, many, as of many, but he says, to your offspring.

That is, to one person, to Christ. This promise that was given to Abraham, who is this promise about, this offspring?

It's Jesus. The promises are fulfilled in Jesus. The great blessings, the great recipients of all these blessings are in Christ.

You want to obtain these promises, then you need to go in Christ. You see, here are the false teachers coming in and you want to be a part of Abraham's family, you want to be a part of his descendants, well then you need to come and be circumcised and obey the law.

[28 : 20] But Paul is saying, no, no, no, there's a deeper significance to what has been written. There is one recipient that the promise was looking forward to and that is Jesus. Here I have an envelope, it's Christ.

He's the one that the promises are looking forward to. The offspring, for me to enjoy these promises, to enjoy the relationship that Christ enjoys with God, I need to be in Christ.

So here I am, Paul Dudley. I want to enjoy the promises, the promises that we're looking forward in terms of one person, that of Christ.

Then I need to be in Christ. So I open up my little envelope and there I am in Christ, enjoying the blessings and the promises in Christ.

Paul's big argument is, you want to enjoy the inheritance, you want to enjoy the promises, the blessings, it's in Christ. Well, it's been a fairly long and hard argument.

[29 : 35] Paul has argued from the experience of their early Christian experience, he's argued from scripture using the example of Abraham and the fact that you actually couldn't keep the human will, you weren't able to do it because we were not morally able to do it.

He's also argued for the priority of the promise, using the example of human wills. But notice that the central part of all his argument is the scandalous cross.

This is a scandal, isn't it? What an utter scandal. For the Jews, anyone to hang upon a tree was a scandal. To say that God's son, God himself, to hang on a tree, that's blasphemous.

What a scandal. A false verb by the name of that verb. thought that Christianity was absolutely deplorable.

He thought that it was just terrible. It was the worst of all religions. Why? Because it was based on redemption of an innocent party, someone who didn't deserve it, taking the punishment for another.

[30 : 44] What a scandal. That someone who was innocent, taking the punishment for someone else. And not only that, but God himself.

This is an utterly profound thing. The fact that God himself hung on the cross for us, taking the punishment for us.

We need to keep on coming back and looking at the cross. It is the central part of our message. it is there that we see the great scandal, the great place where we are able to enjoy the promises of God.

Well, let me give you a few points of application from this passage tonight. Some take-home messages for yourself. I thought, well, perhaps we should reflect on some of the spiritual experiences that Paul talks about.

You know, experiences are important. I thought, no, no, I haven't got enough time to talk about that. But we could spend some time talking about that. We could talk about Paul's high view of scripture, the way that Paul uses scripture, but I haven't got time to talk about that.

[31 : 52] I thought for a moment that we might reflect on the fact that we have a profound ability to keep on going back to rules as Christians, each one of us. Just stop and think for a moment.

When you're in the midst of a terrible dry time in your Christian life, when you're going through a really hard time, when you stumble as a Christian again, think, what is the next thing that you do?

What is it that you do? Are you a person who works harder? I've got to work harder at this. I've got to put more things in place so that I don't stumble.

I've got to read my Bible more, I've got to be praying, I've got to do, do, do. Often we go back to doing, don't we?

we return to rules about the doing of things. We need to go back and look at the cross and trust in God, trusting God's spirit to be working in our life.

[33 : 01] We often go and do the do's. It's very easy to keep on becoming more and more legalistic in our Christianity and trying to impose upon each other.

If you don't have a daily quiet time, you cannot be a Christian. If you want to be more pleasing to God, then you need to be not washing your car on Sunday.

What about this? Often if I've got to make a big decision, or I've got to preach on Sunday on a very difficult passage, I'll make sure I have all my quiet times during the week and I'll make sure I say all my prayers because if I do all these things, God might be pleased with me.

And then when I get up there and start preaching, it's going to be all okay. Is it starting to ring some bells? We're trying to do the doing rather than trusting in God, looking at God's promises, trusting in God's promises.

It's just legalism in new clothes. What about for those who feel a failure in their Christianity? Christianity? They want to call themselves a Christian but only if I can prove myself.

[34 : 11] If I go to church but it's only out of duty or I say some more prayers because it's a part of the habit or living a morally respectable life, if I do all these things then perhaps I can prove that I am a Christian.

But deep down it's all just a matter of self-esteem, a matter of pride, of looking good in front of others and you sort of feel this sense of unworthiness, profound anxiety and despair, you feel a failure in your Christian life, that you're just not living up, you're not doing the things that you should be doing.

Stop trying to turn Christianity into rules. Start living by faith, trusting in God. All these things that I've spoken about are important things in the Christian life, but they're fruit of the Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit, the Spirit working in our lives, that great promise, that great blessing of God that has given us, means that our lives will be full of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control.

These are the things that are fruit of the Spirit. These are the outworkings in our life. These are the positive things. This is the way that we live our life because of God's Spirit in us.

[35 : 37] It's the fruit of the Spirit. It's the things that God by His Spirit helps us to do. let us not be people who live our Christian lives as people trying to do the do's.

Christianity is one that starts, is maintained and comes to fruition only through a dependence on God's activity in His Holy Spirit, not relying on the works of the law to complete our Christian lives.

Amen. Thank the Why is what is the husband and the Lord?

Warren and the Lord me.