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The Atonement

by **J. Gresham Machen** (1881-1937)



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"For as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse; for It Is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the law to do them.' But that in the law no one is justified with God is clear, because 'the just shall live by faith'; but the law is not of faith but 'he who has done them shall live in them.' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangeth upon a tree,' in order that unto the Gentiles the blessing of Abraham might come in Christ Jesus, in order that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:10-14).

The Curse of the Law

"It is those who are of faith who receive Abraham's blessing," says the Apostle in effect; "for certainly those who are of the works of the law do not; indeed, far from receiving a blessing, they receive only a curse — a curse from which Christ had to set them free before the blessing could ever possibly come to them" (verses 10-14).

Everyone who depends upon his own accomplishment of the works which the law prescribes is under a curse; "for it is written (Deut. 27:16), 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the law to do them.'" It is evident that one link is here omitted from the argument. "Everyone," Paul says, "who depends upon his own obedience to the law is under a curse; for the law pronounces a curse upon all who disobey." The argument depends of course, altogether upon the assumption that no one has obeyed the law. If anyone had obeyed the law, then the curse which the law pronounces upon disobedience would not apply to him.

But this assumption is to Paul so much a matter of course that it does not need to be expressed. Some expositors, indeed, think that it is expressed — in the next verses, where Paul says that when the Scripture declares that "the just shall not live by his works — in other words, that he has not really kept the law — since justification by works and justification by faith are mutually exclusive. But it is simpler, and, we are inclined to think, better, to say that the argument in verse 10 is complete in itself and that that argument depends on the unexpressed but obviously valid assumption that no one has really kept the law. The law pronounces a curse upon disobedience; no one has really obeyed; therefore all are under the curse.

Thus verses 11f. are best to be regarded as presenting a separate argument in defense of the thesis that everyone who depends upon his own works is under a curse. The first argument (verse 10) is that since the law pronounces a curse upon disobedience, and since all have disobeyed, therefore

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all are under the curse. The second argument (verses 11f.) is that since the Scripture says that a man is justified (and attains life) by his faith he cannot possibly be justified by his works, since being justified by faith and being justified by works are mutually exclusive.

Grace vs. Merit

"But that in the law [practically the same as 'by means of the law'] no one is justified before God is plain," because [as Scripture says, Hab. 2:4] 'the just shall live by faith.' But the law is not of faith [does not partake of the nature of faith], but [as Scripture says, Lev. 18:5] 'he who has done them [the commandments] shall live in [or 'by'] them,'" Paul means to say, "describe the nature of the law. It requires doing something. But faith is the opposite of doing. So when the Scripture says that a man is justified by faith, that involves saying that he is not justified by anything that he does. There are two conceivable ways of salvation. One way is to keep the law perfectly, to do the things which the law requires. No mere man since the fall has accomplished that. The other way is to receive something, to receive something that is freely given by God's grace. That way is followed when a man has faith. But you cannot possibly mingle the two. You might conceivably be saved by works or you might be saved by faith; but you cannot be saved by both. It is 'either or' here not 'both and.' But which shall it be, works or faith? The Scripture gives the answer. The Scripture says it is faith. Therefore it is not works."

Such is Paul's argument. The law, far from bringing the blessing, brought only a curse. Far from being an aid to salvation, the law in itself was a stupendous obstacle to salvation. It was not merely that salvation had to be obtained in a way that was independent of the law. That is no adequate statement of the case. No, the stupendous obstacle which the law

interposed against salvation had to be overcome before salvation could be obtained.

The obstacle was overcome by Christ. But how was it overcome? Paul now gives the answer, and in doing so he unfolds the inmost heart of the gospel.

"Christ Redeemed Us"

"Christ redeemed us," he says, "from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." The first question is whom he designates by "us." Does he mean

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all Christians; or does he mean Jewish Christians, who had previously been expressly under the curse of the Mosaic law and were now redeemed from that curse by Christ? On the whole, it is probable that he means the latter. In this Epistle, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles is very much in view, it had been insisted upon by the Judaizers; Paul is showing how it is done away in Christ. So here, when he says, "Christ redeemed us... In order that unto the Gentiles the blessing of Abraham might come in Jesus Christ," it seems rather clear that he is contrasting "us" with "Gentiles," so that by "us" he must designate not all Christians but only Jewish Christians.

This interpretation does not, however, do away with the application of this glorious text to all of us today. Nothing could be further from Paul's thought than to hold that although Christ redeemed Jewish Christians from the curse of the Mosaic law there was no divine curse from which He redeemed all Christians. On the contrary, in Rom. 2:14f. Paul says that even the Gentiles have the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness. It is entirely in accordance with the teaching of the Apostle, therefore, when the Westminster Shorter Catechism says. "All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under His wrath and curse." The curse of God's law rested upon all mankind, both Jew and Gentile, and from that curse both Jew and Gentile were redeemed by Christ.

There is no reason at all to weaken the force of the word "redeem," in the sentence, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law." It means "to buy off," "to set free by the payment of a price." Truly Christ did pay a price to set us free, the price of His own precious blood. On this subject the reader is referred to the splendid articles of B. B. Warfield, "The New Testament Terminology of Redemption," and "Redeemer and Redemption," in *Biblical Doctrines*, 1929, pp. 325-398. These articles should forever dispose of the habit of depriving these wonderful Biblical words of their true, rich meaning. We are not saved by the Lord Jesus Christ by some method that cost Him nothing. No, we were bought with a price; in the fullest sense of the word we were "redeemed."

Christ Our Substitute

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." That is only a more forcible way of saying that Christ bore a curse for us, or that He became, accursed for us. Perhaps the reason why Paul avoids saying that Christ became "accursed" for us is that the word "accursed" in Greek, like the English word, might mean "worthy of a curse," and in that sense the word would not apply. Christ was not worthy of the curse that He bore upon the cross. We alone were worthy of it, He endured it for us though He was worthy of naught but glory and honor and praise.

But what curse was it that Christ bore upon the cross? There ought really to be no doubt about the answer. It was our curse, the curse of God's law that rightly rested upon us because of sin.

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It is perfectly true, indeed, that the Greek preposition here translated "for" does not necessarily indicate substitution; it does not necessarily mean "instead of."

The preposition that does mean "instead of" is used, for example, in Mk. 10:45, where it is said that "the Son of Man came...to give His life a ransom instead of many." There we find the great doctrine of the substitutionary atonement taught in the plainest possible way by our Lord Himself and in that one of the Gospels which is thought by modern skeptical criticism to be the earliest of the four.

But although the preposition, which means most clearly "instead of," is not used in our passage, yet our passage teaches the substitutionary atonement in the clearest possible way. Some scholars think that the preposition which is used here shades over in certain passages into the meaning "instead of." There is something to be said for such a view. But the question is here quite unimportant; for even if the preposition means in our passage, as it usually does, "in behalf of," "for the benefit of," and not "instead of," yet the idea of substitution is presented by the entire context in the clearest possible manner. "We were under the curse of the law," says Paul; and "Christ redeemed us by becoming a curse in our behalf." Christ bore a curse when He hung there on the cross. But what curse was it? Paul makes the answer perfectly plain. It was not merely the curse of some human law; but it was the curse of God's law. True, Christ died at the hands of wicked men, putting Him to death was a terrible crime. But He died, according to Paul as well as according to Peter, "by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God," and the curse which Paul quotes in the very next verse as resting upon Christ is the curse of the law of God.

Here we come to the very heart of Paul's teaching. The curse which Christ bore upon the cross was not a curse that wrongly rested upon Him; it was not a curse pronounced upon Him by some wicked human law. No, it was the curse of God's law; it was a curse, therefore, — we tremble as we say it, but the Scripture compels us to say it — it was a curse that rightly rested upon Him. But if that be so, there can be no doubt but that the

substitutionary atonement is taught in Scripture. The only way in which a curse could rightly rest upon a sinless One is that He was the substitute, in bearing that curse, for those upon

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whom it did rightly rest. That is the heart of Paul's teaching and the heart of the whole Bible.

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