

GALATIANS 3:13, 14 GOD'S GREAT GIFT

“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.’”¹

Gxchanging gifts is a tradition associated with the celebration of Christmas. Although giving gifts is a part of other celebrations, giving and receiving gifts is an important part of the tradition that has grown up around Christmas. Perhaps it was first practised to commemorate the gifts which the Magi brought to Mary’s newborn child, or perhaps it was simply an expression of the joy that marks this holy season. Whatever the reason, today we look forward to giving gifts to those whom we love; and undoubtedly, we each enjoy receiving gifts as well.

Today, I do not want to probe some arcane theological tenet, though the theme of the message is great. Neither do I imagine that our explorations will be considered profound. Rather, I anticipate that most of us will murmur assent, thinking that we have heard nothing that we did not already know. Of course, there is no new knowledge in this message, but it is a wonderful opportunity to recall the goodness of God expressed in the great gift of life in His Beloved Son. Join me, then, in reviewing the Apostle’s exclamation concerning God’s great gift.

GOD’S GREAT GIFT IDENTIFIED — “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” God’s great gift to mankind is redemption. “Redeem” is a term virtually unknown to modern Canadians, except in reference to investment. Theologically, the term has fallen into disuse.

However, this was not always the case. Recall some of the great hymns of a bygone era.

Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it!
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb,
Redeemed through His infinite mercy,
His child, and forever, I am.²

I will sing of my Redeemer and His wondrous love to me;
On the cruel cross He suffered from the curse to set me free.³

I have a song I love to sing, since I have been redeemed,
Of My Redeemer, Saviour King, since I have been redeemed.⁴

Though not sung much today, they speak of a forgotten truth of Christ as our Redeemer.

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² Fanny Crosby, “Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It!”

³ Phillip Paul Bliss, “I Will Sing of My Redeemer”

⁴ Edwin Othello Excell, “Since I Have Been Redeemed”

If redemption is so great, why do we not hear more about it? Perhaps the reason is that we preachers have grown careless. We have a tendency to pander to the base desires of those who listen to us, telling them what they want to hear. This may well be a reflection of our desire to be liked, being driven more by culture than by Christ. What I am saying is that our fear of man is often greater than our fear of God. Consequently, we sidestep controversial issues and refrain from saying anything that would hurt the feelings of those who listen and who provide our support.

Paul certainly speaks of redemption. He attests that redemption is in Christ Jesus [ROMANS 3:24]. Though our souls are redeemed, we await the redemption of our bodies [ROMANS 8:23]. Now, however, the Risen Son of God is “our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:30]. By His sacrifice, Jesus our Lord has redeemed us from all lawlessness and has purified for Himself a people for His own possession [see TITUS 2:14]. Because of this redemption He has provided, we now have the forgiveness of sins, indeed, the forgiveness of every trespass [see EPHESIANS 1:7], and we have received the adoption as sons [GALATIANS 4:5].

Thus, redemption is intimately associated with the concept of forgiveness and adoption and ultimately our transformation into the image of the Risen Son of God. However, knowing this does not yet explain what is meant by redemption. At the simplest level, redemption speaks of purchasing in the marketplace. In particular, the word speaks of purchasing again that which belonged to an individual and which has now been placed for sale in the marketplace. Too many people have stopped at this point without considering what the Bible says concerning redemption in its entirety.

The danger of stopping at this point is that we may draw the conclusion that our Lord engaged in some sort of monetary exchange with the devil to purchase us back. This view once held sway over theologians during the middle ages, and it still has currency among some individuals who prove careless in handling the Word of God. There are still people who imagine that in His death on the cross, Jesus was actually “paying” the devil a price required in order to buy back our souls.

As we have already seen, redemption speaks of the forgiveness of sins, the forgiveness of trespasses, and sets the stage for our adoption as sons. In other words, redemption speaks of setting aside the condemnation that we have appropriated to ourselves and preparing us to receive the inheritance of God's own sons. Without the “adoption as sons,” we have no inheritance.

Did God pay a price to redeem us? Scripture is quite clear that Christ gave His life in order to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession; and so in the broadest sense, yes, Christ Jesus redeemed us. However, the language appears to be figurative. If you wish to insist that a price was paid, because the sacrifice was to secure the forgiveness of sins and the forgiveness of every trespass, then the price was paid to God. Jesus, by His sacrifice, provided for us to be forgiven and for us to receive the adoption as sons. The death was necessary to provide salvation, setting aside all condemnation and equipping us for eternity.

Paul is making an effort to assist his readers to realise the magnitude of the gift that God has provided in the sacrifice of His Son. If we are to look for an analogy, perhaps it is more correct to speak of being freed from sin than it is to speak of being purchased. If we are to understand the Apostle we need to focus on the effect of His work rather than focusing exclusively on the transaction itself.

We are loosed from our sin. According to the Word of God, we have been freed from *the penalty of sin*. Though our bodies are subject to death, in the redemption we have received from our Lord Jesus Christ we have the testimony of the indwelling Spirit of God and the promise of the Word that our bodies shall be redeemed. What else can the Apostle John mean than this when he writes in his first letter [1 JOHN 2:28-3:3], “And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”

Paul declares to the Philippian Christians, “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” [PHILIPPIANS 3:20, 21].

Though this body is subject to death, and though life is always tenuous, God has promised that we shall receive a transformed body. Writing the Corinthians, Paul states, “I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”
“O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?”

“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” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-57].

We are also freed from *the power of sin*. I do not mean to imply that we somehow live sinless lives or that we are already perfected, but we no longer need to yield to the power of sin. When we were identified with the world, we were powerless to live holy, godly lives. However, when we were redeemed, we received the Holy Spirit who now empowers us to turn from sin and to embrace righteousness.

Listen to a rather extended portion of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul is relating what these Christians confessed in their baptism, drawing the logical inference that their profession does not permit them to live as they lived before that confession. “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace” [ROMANS 6:1-14].

We shall ultimately be freed from *the presence of sin*. Heaven will have no sinners. There will be nothing that offends Holy God in His Heaven. John, writing of what God has planned for those who love Him, described the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. John testified, “The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” [REVELATION 21:22-27].

A few short lines later, John pronounces one of the several benedictions found in the Apocalypse. It is followed by a severe warning for those who believe that God will wink at sin and permit them to continue as they always have throughout all eternity. “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” [REVELATION 22:14, 15].

Outside the Holy City, excluded from Heaven, are dogs—the morally impure, especially homosexual sinners [see DEUTERONOMY 23:18]. Paul refers to false teachers as “dogs” [see PHILIPPIANS 3:2, 3]. The use of “dogs” speaks of that which is degraded, morally destitute and utterly debased. The term appears to be synonymous with the “detestable” listed in REVELATION 21:8. Sorcerers [Greek, *phármakoi*], likely refers to the recreational use of drugs. Rounding out this dark list of those excluded from Heaven are the sexually immoral, murderers, idolaters, and all who love and practise falsehoods. There will be no seventy-two virgins for martyrs, as though God will permit and condone a sort of celestial immorality for all eternity. Moreover, those who have lived a lied, deceiving ultimately only themselves, are excluded. In the Psalms, God has stated:

“No one who practices deceit
shall dwell in my house;
no one who utters lies
shall continue before my eyes.”

[PSALM 101:7]

God's great gift is the redemption we have received in Christ Jesus our Lord. That redemption is intimately associated with all that we are as Christians. Ultimately, this is redemption from sin, preparing us for eternity itself. This is the reason we are repeatedly urged to live holy and godly lives as befits those who are redeemed. We are to so live that we do not disgrace Him who died for us and has freed us from our sin.

GOD'S GREAT GIFT EVALUATED — “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” In our text, Paul specifically says that Christ has “redeemed us from the curse of the law.” He did this by “becoming a curse for us.” Perhaps we should phrase the question, what did redemption cost the Saviour? It is tantamount to asking, “How great is Christ's love for His people?”

None of us can truly know the full extent of God's love. Neither can we affix a value to what Christ has accomplished for us. Because He gave His life as a sacrifice, committing to expend Himself before even the world began, we cannot comprehend the cost to Him in providing salvation. Of Jesus, Peter testifies, “You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake” [1 PETER 1:18-20].

According to Paul, “For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21]. The sinless Son of God became sin so that we could be redeemed. Christ became a curse for us. His death was not an accident, for He testifies that it was for this purpose that He came. Jesus said that it was because He lay down His life that the Father loved Him [JOHN 10:17]. Before Pilate, He stated that He was born in order to die [see JOHN 18:37]. He testified to His disciples, “The Son of Man came ... to give His life as a ransom” [MARK 10:45].

What is important to understand is that Jesus came specifically to give His life in the place of sinful man. He did this, even though He is the Lord of Glory without sin. Thus, Scripture attests that Jesus “was made lower than the angels,” though He is “now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death.” Then, the author boldly states that “by the grace of God He ... taste[d] death for everyone” [HEBREWS 2:9].

There are within society today some who argue that it is ethical to create a child in order to secure organs for those who are now living outside the womb. However, we need to be very clear that such an act is utterly selfish. It is creating a life in order to preserve a one now alive; the child that is created in the womb never has a say in such a transaction. However, this was not the case for the Son of God. He came with this one specific purpose, to give His life to redeem those who were hostile to Him.

The Word of God presents this truth quite clearly—Christ Jesus gave Himself voluntarily. God became a man for the express purpose of giving His life as a sacrifice. He presented Himself in the place of those who deserved to die. Jesus the Lord tasted death for everyone so that none of us need face death. The forgiveness of sin and the adoption as sons of God is now extended to those who were rebels to grace.

The passage is extended, but it is good for us to review Isaiah's prophecy presenting the Messiah as the Suffering Servant of the Lord God.

“Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

“Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

[ISAIAH 53:4-12]

No price can be attached to the redemption provided in the death of the Saviour.
In the Psalms is a thought-provoking statement of the value of a soul.

“No man can by any means redeem *his* brother
Or give to God a ransom for him—
For the redemption of his soul is costly”

[PSALM 49:7]⁵

Since this is true, we are left with a mystery, though a mystery of inestimable value, speaking as it does of life for each one who receives the sacrifice of Jesus the Lord.

GOD'S GREAT GIFT PROPHESED — “It is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’” The death of Jesus was not an afterthought; God was not forced to scramble to find a Plan B. Christ was born to die, and throughout the Old Covenant are multiplied prophecies of His sacrifice written before His Incarnation. Paul cites one in this passage, quoting from the Pentateuch when He states, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” [cited from DEUTERONOMY 21:23].

When reading the Christmas story, we are introduced to Simeon, a man who was righteous and devout, and who was said to be “waiting for the consolation of Israel” [LUKE 2:25]. Simeon had received a promise from the Holy Spirit that “he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” [LUKE 2:26]. In a similar manner, when Jesus was presented in the Temple, his father and mother met Anna, the daughter of Phanuel. When she encountered the little family, “she began to give thanks to God and to speak of [the child] to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” [LUKE 2:36-38]. These two godly people were moved by the Spirit of God to take seriously the prophetic Word that promised Messiah would come.

With the advantage of hindsight, we wonder how any of the Jewish people could have been taken by surprise at the advent of Messiah. God had prophesied that He would be born of a virgin [ISAIAH 7:14; GENESIS 3:15]. It was foretold that Messiah would come from the Tribe of Judah [GENESIS 49:10], and more specifically He would be a descendent of David [2 SAMUEL 7:11-13]. Daniel had even foretold the specific time that Messiah was to be presented in Jerusalem [DANIEL 9:24-27].

Micah had prophesied the place of His birth [MICAH 5:2], a prophecy that was well known to all that lived in Jerusalem in the days in which Jesus was born. When the Magi came seeking Him in order to worship Him, Herod asked the chief priests and scribes where Messiah was to be born. They did not confer with one another, but immediately answered, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.””

[MATTHEW 2:5, 6]

Moreover, as we have seen, it was prophesied that He would come to give His life as a sacrifice in order to redeem fallen mankind. One cannot read the intense words of the 22nd PSALM without realising that this is a prophecy of the death of Messiah.

⁵ **New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update** (Lockman Foundation, LaHabra, CA 1995)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
from the words of my groaning?”

“I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

“For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.”

[PSALM 22:1, 14-18]

There should have been no surprise either at His birth or at the reason for that birth. God's Anointed One, the Prince of Peace, was born so that He might provide His life as a ransom for many. He came precisely because mankind is in need of a Saviour, and He came to fulfil all the prophecies delivered beforehand.

What shall we make of this? If the birth of Jesus has become for us simply another opportunity to party, if this holy occasion is simply another opportunity to gather the family to feast and enjoy one another's company, if this is a mere excuse to make brownie points with our friends and colleagues, we are missing the fullness of joy God intends His people to experience. Because Jesus was born of a virgin, we are the recipients of hope and joy. This is not the artificial, transient happiness that characterises the festivities of the world, but it is the settled contentment that comes from knowing that our sin is removed and that we have peace with God.

With the angels, all who know this Prince of Peace can exult in the knowledge that there is truly “peace among those with whom [God] is pleased.” Do you have this peace? If this peace has eluded you during this joyous season, it is time to make peace with God. We do that first by receiving the sacrifice of the Saviour who died because of our sin. Then, as those who are redeemed, we learn to walk by faith, knowing that He is directing our steps and guiding us in paths that He has marked out for us.

This is the call of God for all who hear the message today. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Believe this Good News and receive the forgiveness of sin promised in the redemption that Jesus provides through His sacrifice and with His resurrection from the dead. Amen.