

The Saving Work of Christ, III

We are studying Christ's saving work, specifically now looking at the biblical pictures the Bible paints to describe Christ's death as saving. Christ's death is a mighty victory. We saw the seeds of this already in Isaiah 53. Let us go to Colossians 2. I said earlier that the way we commonly do it by blending together the different themes is perfectly fine because the Bible itself does it. And here is an example in Colossians 2:13-15: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ." When you were spiritually dead, God regenerated you. "He forgave us all our sins." How does the forgiveness come about? We had a two-fold plight: we were spiritually dead and we were sinful. God gave us new life that countered the spiritual death. What about the sinfulness? He forgave us all our sins. Just by fiat? He just spoke the word and we were forgiven? No. The cross has to do with forgiveness. He forgave us all our sins having canceled the written bond or code with its regulation that was against us and that stood opposed to us. He took it away, nailing it to the cross—that is going on here. How could He cancel or blot out the written code? What is the written code? What is the bond? First of all, it is important to see that the written code is presented as a bond, a debt, or a bill of indebtedness. Specifically when it says, "with its regulations," it points to the law of God. How does the law of God become our bond of indebtedness? The law is given by God; it reflects His holy character to us as we said previously. There is nothing wrong with the law, but there is a great deal wrong with us and as the law hits us, it exposes us. That is why He could say, "The written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us." This is one of the reasons Martin Luther included the law as one of our enemies. He knew it was holy and just and good and spiritual in itself, but when it comes in contact with us, it slays us. In that way, it becomes our enemy. It says therefore that God "canceled the law." Did He do something illegal? How could He blot out the written code? First, understand the law of God is here presented as a bond against us. It represents our own bill of indebtedness to God. It is as if we hear the Ten Commandments and we sign our name at the bottom and say, "Yes, Lord, we will do it," even as Israel did, but no sooner do we sign than the law, which is God's standard for life, condemns us. It does become a bond that is against us because it shows how we have fallen short and it exposes us and becomes a record of our guilt. Here is the law of God, which thus becomes our bond of indebtedness to God. We are debtors. We owe what we cannot pay. God canceled that written code. He blotted it out. It is the language of bookkeeping. Can He just do that? The answer is no, He just cannot do that.

God blotted out our bill of indebtedness that consisted of the Ten Commandments to which we had, as it were, signed our names. How did He do it? He did it by taking it away. He took it out of our sight by nailing it to the cross of His Son. What a vivid picture of Christ taking the penalty for our sins. The law of God, representing our debt, which we cannot pay, is taken and nailed to Christ's cross. The meaning is plain. He shoulders our debt. He takes our bill of indebtedness and makes it His own so when we say, "Christ paid the penalty for our sins," we are not kidding and we are not incorrect. That is exactly what this imagery shows. God made alive those who were dead; He forgave our sins. Here is how He blotted out our bill of indebtedness. The bond that was against us, He blotted out by marking it "paid in full" when He nailed it to the cross of His son who died to pay our debt. He died by taking our penalty upon Himself. So the placard over His head, Paul says, was the bond against us, representing a debt that we could not pay. Is that not a beautiful picture of forgiveness? By the way, it is in the cross and the promises of God that are based upon it that we find forgiveness, and it is in a proper understanding of the cross of Christ that we get and keep the assurance of salvation. We are never able to please God on our own and even as Christians God does not save us, dust us off, and then say, "Okay, now do it on your own, keep yourself, please me, and accomplish this with your own assurance." No, He does tie assurance to our performance and He also bears witness deep within by His Holy Spirit. But chiefly, assurance is not subjective as in those two ways. Those are real ways and those who claim to know Jesus

need to live for Jesus with all their hearts, but they are not going to live perfectly for Him, and part of the normal Christian life, as both the Lord's Prayer and 1 John 1 teaches us, is confessing our sins. The relationship is once-for-all and it cannot be broken. God enters into marriage with us and He will not divorce us, but certainly the quality of our marriage depends upon our communicating with Him and our love to Him, but assurance ultimately rests in the cross of Christ. He paid our debt. My conscience can rest in Him. Here is the only worthy object of our faith: Christ and His atonement. So the place to start in ministering the assurance of salvation to people is to make sure they understand the work of Christ. If I hold the cross up high and understand who it is who died for me and what He did, then I can rest in His work. It does not mean I do not work. No, the greatest impetus for living for the Lord with all of our strength is resting in what Christ did. But we need a solid understanding that Christ did for us what we could not do. In the legal language, here on His cross was nailed our bond of indebtedness. He paid my debt when I trust Him and Him alone. I have peace with God and even a clear conscience not because I am sinless—because I am not—but because even when I sin I run to Him and confess and our relationship stays good. It is a growing and good relationship.

Verse 15 seems at first to be jarring in its shift in direction. Here is no longer legal language; here is the language of conflict and victory. The victory theme goes back to the Garden of Eden. The first mention of redemption in the Garden of Eden was given in terms of conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent and even serious conflict: "He will strike your heel." The woman's seed was struck on the heel, that is, with a serious blow by the devil. The reference ultimately—although, again, Adam and Eve could not understand it perfectly, but God could—was to the cross of Christ and the prince of this world, as John's gospel says, coming to slay the redeemer. Oh, but the woman's seed would deal the devil a fatal blow. He would smite him in the head—the cross was the vanquishing of the evil one and of his demons. Colossians 2:15 shifts from legal language to victory language: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities [...]" This is the language of a triumphal procession. It is a language of conflict—of victory and defeat. These defeated enemies are not put to the sword, rather they are stripped—the word is literally stripped, though I do not know if it is to be read literally; at least they were disarmed. Maybe their weapons were taken away and likewise their clothing was taken away and they were paraded naked through the streets. What a terrible indignity in the ancient world as warriors. Instead they would become the object of derision, even of children. They would be on display as it were. Anyway, the powers and authorities (which are words for angels—in this context obviously evil angels—since we are talking about God's enemies) were at least stripped of their weapons. Christ disarmed them. Not only so, but He made a public spectacle of them. That language leads me toward the conclusion that God is taking the clothing and the weapons away. It is certainly the language of a triumphal march. The enemies are marched through the conquering city's town and the people rejoice in the victors and the defeated foes are utterly shamed. Christ is triumphing over them by the cross. The cross thus has a double function in the passage. It is where our bond is posted and God writes on it, as it were, "Paid in full." He blots out the written code that was against us. Does this mean there is no obligation for us to obey the Ten Commandments in our daily lives? Of course it does not. But it means the Ten Commandments carry no more threat for us. The rigor of the law, to use Calvin's terminology, is put aside. It has no more bite in it. The thunderbolts of the curse of the law can no longer strike us because they have struck the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us. Not only so, but His cross was a might conquest of our enemies and, even as the Roman armies paraded their conquered foes through the city, even so the Son of God did the same, as it were.

F.F. Bruce in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Colossians* makes a suggestion of combining the two themes here in verses 14 and 15. He suggests that the placard on the cross was an attempt by God—this is my language now, not his—a way of displaying that "Paid in full" to the heavenly spheres and beings. It was an insult to the devil and demons. "You who would bring the law

and invoke it against my people, take this,” God says. It is finished, paid in full, and there is no more accusation that they can bring because our names are written under the Ten Commandments; we are damned thoroughly, we are totally condemned, but the Son of God died to put that away. It is paid. There is no more debt.

In terms of our foes, we ought to include death. First Corinthians 15 speaks of it as the last enemy. Let us just quickly turn there when we are thinking about Christ as a mighty victor. First Corinthians 15 is important to mention because it is not Christ’s death that is a mighty victory, but it is Christ’s death and resurrection that is a mighty victory. And in this chapter, as you know, there is even a taunting of death in the words of the prophets. First Corinthians 15:54 says, “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin,”—sting here means that which makes death hurtful—“and the power of sin is the law.”—That is, when the law says, “Thou shall not” and we do, the law smites us.—“But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” in His death and in His resurrection from the dead. Death is our enemy indeed. First Corinthians 15:26 says, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”

Hebrews 2 also teaches that Jesus’ death is a victory. It is amazing how we see in the Bible what we look for. And once you get onto this theme, it is all over the place. It is remarkable. First John says more than once that the Son of God died to destroy the works of the devil. Revelation combines the themes. In chapter 5 Jesus is the lion and the lamb; what a strange conjunction of images. He is the lion of the tribe of Judah, the conquering king—the king of the beasts, if you will, using lion imagery. He is the lamb who was slain and is bearing His wounds still, sacrifice and victory side by side. Hebrews 2:14 says, “Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death”—notice the irony of it—“He might destroy him who holds the power of death.” You would think it was by great conquest, by His fighting and not dying. But God’s ways are not our ways, and the epitome of which is the cross. Through weakness there is strength—through apparent defeat there is the greatest conquest. “He shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” Does this mean that it is wrong for Christians to fear their mortality? I do not believe that it is teaching that at all. It is perfectly natural and human to fear our mortality. I knew a woman who got bad counsel, in my estimation, from her pastor years ago. She was afraid of dying. I think we all are at times. The pastor should have said, “Dear lady, I feel like that too sometimes. There is nothing wrong with it; the Lord understands. He can even help us with that one.” When the Bible says we should not fear death, it does not just mean dying—it is abnormal for human beings to die because we were not made to die—but it means the fear of the judgment that follows death. First John 4 says that God’s perfect love has cast out all that fear of punishment. We need have no fear of hell, Romans 8:1, because “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” We are allowed to be afraid of dying and leaving our loved ones and so forth. That is perfectly permissible.

Be honest with the Lord and with each other and we do not need to be super spiritual. The Lord can even help us with that. But we need not fear the wrath of God for the Son of God has taken it out of the way for us. So there in Hebrews 2 the Son becomes a man so He could die and defeat our enemy, the devil, and so He could redeem us from the bondage of the fear of judgment. He has come to liberate us. We need to study Jesus the liberator more because, as I said earlier, we live in an age in which people are in bondage to all kinds of things and God has resources here. I am not saying that we can use a biblical band-aid for cancer; I am not against the use of psychology and so forth in helping people, but Jesus Christ is the champion, the victor, and we need to teach that more than we have. The whole notion of a victorious Christian life flows out of this picture of the work of Christ.

The death of Jesus Christ, the second Adam, overturns the effects of Adam's fall. This is Romans 5 among other places, but back to Romans 5 (we were here earlier in the course when we studied the doctrine of sin). Here we come again. There are two Adams in this passage, the first and the second Adam. Christ is the second man, 1 Corinthians 15, the last Adam, and He by His one act of righteousness brings justification and life. Christ is the second Adam. What do I mean by the second? Well think about it. There were only—somehow, ladies, Eve does not count in this reckoning because God made Adam the head—two heads: human beings ever made right. Adam and Eve were made right, but they fell and all of their offspring were distorted or twisted by sin. Here comes one born of a virgin by the spirit of God; He was conceived. He is only the second right man in that way. As I said earlier, to get a proper view of human nature, do not look in the mirror, in the newspaper, or watch the evening news, but rather read about Adam and Eve before the Fall and even better, read about the second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ. Here He comes, the second and the last Adam, because it is He who leads the race of the redeemed into glory (Hebrews 2). Romans 5:18 says, "Just as the result of one trespass"—Adam's, of course—"was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness"—Christ died on the cross—"was justification that brings life for all men." Here Christ's cross work is viewed as an act of righteousness. Adam sinned and plunged the race into ruin. Christ obeys the Father unto death and He rescues His people; He brings them life. Verse 19 says, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man, Adam, the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man, the second Adam, the Lord Jesus, the many will be made righteous." Here Jesus is the second and last Adam who overturns the effects of Adam's fall. We see the same terminology, the same picture, in 1 Corinthians 15 with the comparison of the two Adams as well. Christ's death is sometimes presented in Scripture in legal terms. We saw it in Colossians 2 with our bill of indebtedness being nailed to Jesus' cross. Let us see it in Galatians 3 as well. This passage revolves around the concepts of promise and blessing. You think of the Old Testament Israelites episode where God has the Israelites on the mountains of Ebal and Gerazim reciting the blessings and curses of the law. What are they doing? They are speaking the Word of God into the air. They are speaking God's dynamic, living, effective, powerful Word and what they say is going to come down on their own heads. If they obey, they will be blessing. If they disobey, the curses they have spoken will fall upon them. In Galatians 3 it says, "The Scripture foresaw," verse 8, "that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the Gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith," who, in verse 6, "Believed God and it was credited to Him as righteousness." And verse 7 says, "Understand then that those who believe are children of Abraham." The emphasis is those who believe the Gospel as opposed to those who do the law. There are big contrasts here.

In contrast to believers who are sons of Abraham and who reap eternal life and blessing, verse 10 says, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'" The emphasis is on "cursed" and "do" along with "the law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law because, as the Old Testament says, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith, but on doing. "The man who does these things will live by them." Paul is showing that these two are antithetical. They are opposed to each other: curse and blessing. Blessing is for the one who believes; curse is for the one who does not obey. We all have not obeyed so we are all under a curse. How do we get ourselves out from under the curse so as to inherit the blessing that God promised to Abraham when he said, "All nations will be blessed through you"? "All nations" is the promise of redemption given, not in the Garden of Eden, but in God's covenant to Abraham. It ultimately promised salvation to the Gentiles, to the nations. Israel did not understand it; they thought it meant the Gentiles were going to come into Israel, and some did, but by and large they did not. In God's ultimate promise, the seed, Paul says later on in this chapter, is Christ Himself and the nations involve the Gentiles, whom God brings near to Himself through Christ. How

does God take away this curse? Does He just dismiss it? No, He cannot just dismiss it. He must deal with it justly. Verse 13 tells us that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written,” we find that expression repeatedly used here and it is no surprise. Paul is opposing the Judaizers who are teaching that one establishes and maintains one’s relationship before God by keeping the law. It is not true, he says. We would never be saved that way. Instead Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. It is hard to imagine language that more closely associates our desert and Christ’s death. He became a curse for us. Does it mean He ceased being the God-man and became another entity, a curse? No. But it means the punishment for our sins was so closely associated with Him it could be said of Him that He became a curse for us. The Old Testament proof is this: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree,” and He was hung.

Calvin said it this way: God sent the thunderbolt of His law—the curse of the law—against us. It came from heaven and was heading straight toward our heads. It is what we deserved, that thunderbolt. The Son of God steps in our place with outstretched hands. Smack, it hits Him in His beloved and blessed head instead of us. He redeemed us from the curse of the law. He paid the penalty that we lawbreakers could never pay. How? By becoming a cursed object, as it were, on our behalf. My how He loved us! The cross does demonstrate God’s love but only in that it makes atonement for our sins. Here again is the legal motif of the cross. Christ delivers us from the law’s penalty, from the curse, by taking that penalty upon Himself. To this extent it could be said of Him that He became a curse for us. Let us retire for now and take it up again next time.