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Scot McKnight ...

- What we need to observe here is that there is a difference between fulfilling the law and obeying the law on the one hand, and being sinless on the other. Judaism did not assume that one had to be sinless. What they assumed is that the one who undertook its obligation had to obey it thoroughly, an infraction had to be confessed, and atonement had to be made. Those who did do this, like Paul (Philippians 3:4–6), were considered “legally righteous,” though not sinless. So, if Jews did not think sinlessness was necessary and if Jews, and Christians, thought the law could be fulfilled, then how is it that the “law brings a curse”? The answer to this, I think, is fairly straightforward and has to do with the purpose of the law. ... *The reason the law curses is because that is what the law does and all it can do. The law was never given to make someone righteous nor was it given to give salvation or life.* [McKnight, S. (1995). *Galatians* (pp. 154–155). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.]
- Paul’s answer to the dilemma he had just posed came in the form of a confessional statement that may well have circulated in early Jewish Christian communities as a kind of shorthand summary of the gospel itself: “Now Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by himself becoming a curse for us.” This is the first time in Galatians Paul used the word “redeemed,” although the idea of rescue and deliverance through the self-sacrifice of Christ has been presupposed from the beginning (1:4; also 2:20). The word “redeemed” means literally “to buy off,” “to set free by the payment of a price.” The root word for

redemption in Greek is agora, “marketplace,” the site of the slave auction where everyday in ancient Rome human beings were put up for sale to the highest bidder. The word “redemption” declares that we have been bought with a price. “We are not saved by the Lord Jesus Christ by some method that cost him nothing.” *The “ransom” for our sins was nothing less than the very life blood of the Son of God himself.* [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, pp. 237–238). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]

- The curse of the Law was the punishment demanded because no man could keep from violating its demands, but Christ took that curse upon Himself as a substitute for sinners and became a curse for us in His crucifixion, for it is written (Deuteronomy 21:23), “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” In ancient Judaism a criminal who was executed, usually by stoning, was then tied to a post, a type of tree, where his body would hang until sunset as a visible representation of rejection by God. *It was not that a person became cursed by being hanged on a tree but that he was hanged on a tree because he was cursed. Jesus did not become a curse because He was crucified but was crucified because he was cursed in taking the full sin of the world upon Himself.* That truth was extremely hard for most Jews to accept, because they could not imagine the Messiah’s being cursed by God and having to hang on a tree. [MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1983). *Galatians* (pp. 78–79). Chicago: Moody Press.]

The Shocking Offense of a Crucified Messiah

- As Bruce and others have suggested, Paul may well have worked out his understanding of the relationship of the curse and the cross long before he wrote Galatians. **Why was the cross such a stumbling block (skandalon)** to the Jews, including presumably Saul of Tarsus before he met Christ? Christians claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, and yet it was known to all that their Messiah had been brutally crucified by the Romans outside the gates of Jerusalem. The Messiah was the epitome of blessing, but one “hung on a tree” was by definition “accursed by God.” *According to a later tradition preserved in the Mishna, even an innocent person crucified by a miscarriage of justice still blasphemed the divine Name.* Thus “when Paul was compelled to recognize that the crucified Jesus, risen from the dead, was Messiah and Son of God, he [was] faced with the problem how and why he nevertheless had died under the divine curse.”
- The only explanation could be that the Messiah had willingly taken upon himself the dreaded curse that rightly belonged to others. Here, in nuce, is the genesis of the Christian doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement. Indeed, as Stott has suggested, it may well have been reflection on the very text Paul cited in Galatians 3:13 that led the early Christians to understand the death of Jesus in this way. “The apostles were quite familiar with this legislation [Deuteronomy 21:22–23], and with its implication that Jesus

died under the divine curse. Yet, instead of hushing it up, they deliberately drew people’s attention to it. So evidently they were not embarrassed by it. They did not think of Jesus as in any sense deserving to be accursed by God. They must, therefore, have at least begun to understand that it was our curse which he was bearing.” The shocking offense of a crucified Messiah ... As late as the time of Jerome (d. 420) the shocking image of a crucified and accursed Messiah was a major point of contention between the church and the synagogue. [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, pp. 239–240). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]

- (1 Peter 3:18 ESV) *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.*
- (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV) *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*
- (1 Peter 2:24 ESV) *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.*
- (Acts 5:30–31 ESV) *The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*