

Curse and Promise

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Date: 18 November 2018

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[0 : 0 0] So if you look at all of the cultures around the world, both past and present, and you look at their mythologies and their fairy tales, the children's stories, you'll see a number of things that are different, but you'll see a few things that most cultures around the world have in common when it comes to these kinds of stories.

And one of those common aspects that you see in virtually every society is the concept of a curse. It seems that societies, both past and present, all around the world, all have some kind of understanding of a curse.

If you look at the Greek and Roman cultures, curses are very prevalent. If you anger the gods and goddesses, you're liable to wind up being cursed. It's also very common in Celtic cultures.

It's also common in cultures that practice voodoo, the idea of a voodoo curse. The Mediterranean people have the concept of the evil eye, and you have to protect yourself.

And many people will wear jewels, specific kinds of necklaces and jewelry that's meant to ward off the evil eye. If you look in German cultures, traditional German culture has the concept of the hex.

[1 : 1 4] And even Indian culture has the concept of the shrop. But whatever we call it, whatever name it goes by, most cultures have a concept of a curse embedded in their fairy tales and in their mythology.

And if you look at these stories, they all kind of involve a similar thing. You have somebody who was going along, living their life, then they crossed a line or transgressed or did something wrong. They broke the rules or angered somebody who was more powerful than they were.

And so they wound up being cursed. So if you look, for instance, at the Greek myth of Sisyphus, this is fairly well known, Sisyphus was cursed to spend all of eternity rolling a boulder up a mountain.

But every time he gets near the top, the boulder rolls back down to the bottom and he has to start all over again. Many of us know this story. If you look at the old French fairy tale that we call Beauty and the Beast, what's that about?

That's about a man who is cursed. And because of the curse, he no longer looks like a man. He looks like a terrifying animal, a beast, a monster. And the only way that he can ever be free from this curse is if he gets true love's kiss.

[2 : 2 5] Right? There's another old French fairy tale that we call Sleeping Beauty about a woman who pricks her finger on a poison spinning wheel and ends up falling into an enchanted slumber.

And she'll sleep for a hundred years unless someone with royal blood, comes and wakes her up. Has to be royal blood. Right? There's even in Hindu culture the story of Lord Vishnu.

Lord Vishnu is very powerful, but even Lord Vishnu falls under a curse. Vishnu's curse is interesting. His curse is to be forced to become incarnate in the world and to have to live as a human being and experience all of the suffering that human beings experience in their lives here on earth.

And so you have this concept of a curse that's very widespread. So here's the question I want to ask. Are these stories just for entertainment value or getting our kids to fall asleep at night?

Or are they reflecting something deeper about the human condition? Are all of these stories human and cultural ways of trying to make sense of life and what it means to live in this world as human beings?

[3 : 39] I mean, how many people identify with Sisyphus? Right? You work and you strive and you do the best you can. And no matter how hard you work, the work is never done.

There's always more to do. And even the work that you do do, most of it never lasts. Even the best buildings, the best construction fades over time. Right?

Or you work really hard, but your boss doesn't even seem to notice. Right? Or you excel far beyond your peers and yet you never get promoted. The sense of futility, I think, is present in most everybody's job.

Right? Or if you look at Beauty and the Beast, are there people here who would identify with the beast? Right? There's the person that I know I am, that I should be, that I want to be, the kind of dad that I want to be.

You know, the kind of husband I want to be, the kind of Christian that I want to be, the kind of pastor I want to be. And all too often I feel like what actually comes out is not that person. It's a beast.

[4 : 37] It's a monster. You know, words will leave your mouth and you'll think, how in the world did that come out of me? I'm not like that. And yet all too often you feel that if somebody really saw the truth about you, they would say, man, that's a monster.

They'd run away in fear. Right? Do some of us feel like Sleeping Beauty? Feel like inside, spiritually, I'm numb. I'm, I'm lifeless. I'm dead.

Even the curse that befalls Lord Vishnu, there, you know, you look at the suffering in the world today. You go online and look at all of the atrocious things that are happening around the world. It's easy to begin to think that maybe life itself is a curse.

Right? So today what we're going to do is we're going to look at the concept of the curse and we're going to look at what Scripture has to say about it because this is a very prevalent theme in the Bible. And we're going to look at this wonderful passage, Galatians chapter 3, verses 6 to 14.

And we're going to look at this story in three parts because all good stories, right, have three parts, right? Three acts. First, we're going to look at the curse. Then we're going to look at our redemption.

[5 : 44] How does redemption come from the curse? And then finally the blessing that follows that redemption. So curse, redemption, blessing. Let's pray.

Our Father, we just sang and then we prayed a moment ago about your Word. We prayed that your Word, which is precious, that comes to us from your mouth, that's meant for our good and your glory.

We prayed that that would be something that we are able to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. And so I pray that by the power of your Spirit you would enable us to do just that, Lord, that you would do your work in us through your Word.

In your Son's name, amen. So first we're going to look at the curse. Let me give you a little context of what's going on here in Galatians. There's a major controversy that Paul is addressing in Galatia, and we may word it like this.

Big disagreement. Who is entitled to God's blessing and who is still under God's curse? Who can expect blessing from God and who is still under the curse?

[6 : 50] And there were a number of Jews in Galatia who had converted to Christianity, and yet they believed that they were entitled to God's blessing not because of Jesus, but because of their Jewish identity.

They had been born Jews. They had been circumcised, if they were male, like any faithful Jew. They had kept the ceremonial law to stay clean, and they had observed these things.

They had kept themselves separate from the Gentiles, and so they could reasonably assume, according to Jewish teaching, that they were among the blessed, the chosen.

They were unlike the uncircumcised, those people who don't have the law, those people who are unclean, the Gentile outsiders. Those people are very obviously still under the curse.

So this is what was going on. And Paul's very upset about this. And you know, some of you have asked, why in this series on Galatians have we talked so much about racism over the last several weeks?

[7 : 50] And the reason is this. What we see happening is a form of religiously justified racism. Right? Why should I care about people whom God has cursed?

Why should I spend five minutes thinking about such people? If God's cursed them, they're not worth my time, nor should I even associate with them.

Certainly I shouldn't eat with them or invite them into my home. I might become tainted. I might become cursed yet again, that the curse may be contagious. Therefore, stay away.

So Paul's very upset about this, and so he's confronting this entire way of thinking. And here's what Paul says. Listen to Paul's words.

He says this in verse 10. For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse. So what is he saying? Not just those people who are unclean or uncircumcised, but he says, all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse.

[8 : 58] For it is written, and he quotes Deuteronomy, cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them. The implication is clear. No one can keep everything that's written in the book of the law.

But there's something else that I want to clarify. He uses a phrase, the works of the law. And I just want to be clear. This is a specific phrase with a specific connotation that Paul is fond of.

And it's almost always used in a negative sense. So he's not talking about the law in general. He's not saying the law is bad or evil or broken. What he's saying is the works of the law.

And when he talks about that, he's talking about the idea that one can be saved by observing the law. In other words, it's legalism. So when Paul talks about the works of the law, that's a biblical phrase that means legalism.

And he says if you live that way, if that's the way you think you're going to get blessed, if that's the way you think you're going to escape this curse that you're under, you're deluding yourself. Anyone who does that is still under the curse.

[10 : 01] This would have been utterly shocking to Paul's Jewish hearers. Because they assumed that if anybody would be blessed by God, it would be them. Now let's talk a little bit about what the curse is.

You know, we talked about some fairy tales, but Scripture actually also uses this language of curse. Scripture says, and if you look at the Bible, even though there's lots of different books and lots of different genres, the Bible tells actually one great complete whole story.

And if you go back to the beginning of that story, it tells us that God actually created the world as a good and beautiful and perfect place. And yet it was incomplete. It was a world that by design required human agency.

It was a world that was designed to need us, to care for it, to cultivate it, to bring it to its fullest potential. And then he created human beings to do that kind of work.

But then the Bible says that human beings rejected that vocation. We rejected our place in God's creation. We said we would rather be God than serve God.

[11 : 11] And because of that act of rebellion, that act of sin, we fell. And at that point, the world came under a curse. That's when the curse set in.

So all of the world is under that curse. So what does it mean to live under the curse? What's life like? How do you know you're cursed? Well, think about the fairy tales that we talked about a moment ago.

Right? Living under the curse means we face futility in our work. Genesis 3 talks about the thorns and the thistles. Think about your job. Think about all of the times you feel like you're slamming up against a brick wall, either with something that you're trying to get done or with people that you're trying to deal with, with a deal that you're trying to broker.

You feel like again and again and again, you're slamming up against a brick wall. That's life under the curse. Right? Life under the curse means that there is always a disconnect between the person that we wish we could be and the beast that we often become under the right circumstances, or shall I say the wrong circumstances.

You know, the nicest person, the most agreeable person under the right circumstances can become a monster. There's a disconnect. Right? Especially if you're, you know, I've talked about this already, but if you haven't felt it before, when you become a parent, you really feel it.

[12 : 31] You really, you have all these ideals of the kind of mom or dad you want to be. And almost every day, you're painfully aware of how short you fall of those standards. Right? Living under the curse means being sleeping beauty.

It means being spiritually asleep. And actually, the Bible says we're spiritually dead. We're cold and we're frozen inside. We need to be thawed out. Life under the curse means that much of life is suffering.

The unbearable burden of being in this world is overwhelming sometimes. Right? Life under the curse means there are wildfires tearing California apart, destroying homes, killing people.

You know, life under the curse means that Jewish worshippers sitting in their own synagogue get shot. Right? Life under the curse means again and again and again, we pick up the paper and we read about, we don't really pick up the paper anymore, but we read about atrocious things happening around the world.

We read about a study that tells us our environment is on the brink of irreversible collapse because of human exploitation and inaction. This is life under the curse.

[13 : 36] But the worst thing about the curse, the worst ramification of this state is the fact that the word curse in the Bible is ultimately a covenant word.

And it's used to describe what happens to people who don't keep the covenant that God makes with humanity. And ultimately, what God says to people who want to have nothing to do with Him, people who go their own way, who reject God, who say, I don't even believe in you.

I don't want anybody telling me how to live my life. God ultimately says, what? Have it your way. Spend eternity completely and utterly cut off from me.

The Bible uses the phrase, the outer darkness. That's the end of the curse. That's the ultimate destiny for those who are under the curse. And it's a horrible fate.

So some people, like the Jews, believe this great and pernicious lie that says, even though I'm cursed, I can reverse the curse myself.

[14 : 39] Right? I can escape this curse. I can gain blessing by keeping the ceremonial law, by making sure I'm circumcised, by making sure I'm clean. Right?

But even the most irreligious person, and, you know, I think D.C. is the kind of city that attracts people like this, like moths to a flame. Even the most irreligious people out there, when we look at all that's wrong with the world, all the injustice, all the racism, all the poverty, the economic inequalities, all of these things, there are many, many, many people in this city who believe that with enough willpower, with enough ingenuity, with enough education and awareness, with enough legislation, and the right people in power, we can fix this world once and for all.

Many people are driven by this utopian dream of what could be, if only. And the harsh reality that we have to accept is, that utopian dream is never going to be realized.

It's never going to come. Thousands and thousands of years, and we love to talk about all the progress that we've made, but all of the core issues in the world are still there. They're still there.

You know, I was blessed to be, earlier this week, able to be, Dan and Kevin and I, went to listen to a series of lectures given over a couple of days by N.T. Wright, who's a, you know, great Bible scholar, scholar of history, and somebody that, that I've read a lot of.

[16 : 09] And anyway, his talks are always very eloquent, very inspiring. But one of the talks in particular, I thought was very relevant to, to the things I've been thinking about, because he said, that in many cultures and societies around the world, we all share these common ideals.

Things like justice, truth, beauty, the priority of relationships, even spirituality. These are things that you find, in virtually every culture and society, some concept of these things.

And yet he said, in every case, you're looking at a paradox. Because in every case, you have something like justice, that we value. Virtually every society says, we have to have justice. And yet here's the paradox, we value it, and yet no matter how hard we try, and how long we try, we can never fully attain it.

Right? Why would we value something, that we can't attain? You know, you look at something like justice, and you say, well, you know, we've done a lot in the realm of justice, and maybe we have. See, everybody says, you know, yes, that person needs to be brought to justice.

That wrong needs to be punished. That inequality needs to be rectified. Anybody in this room would say that. But how quickly, how quickly will we shrug off justice, if it's going to be applied to us?

[17 : 23] You know, what's the first thing you do when you're in trouble? You go hire a lawyer. And all of a sudden, it's not about justice anymore, it's about how good your lawyer is at getting you off. Right?

And you look at our criminal justice system. I think lots of people on both sides of the political aisle, would agree that our criminal justice system, is more often than not, criminally unjust.

Right? How many people are just wasting away in prison because of harsh minimum sentencing laws, and some minor infraction has them spending years of their life?

Right? These are things that many people agree, this is not justice. While people with much greater crimes go free, this is not justice. Right? It's a broken system. It's a proximate form of justice at best, but this is the paradox again and again.

Now, why would we value something like justice or power or truth and yet never be able to attain it? That's life under the curse. That's the stone being pushed up the mountain that again and again and again rolls down to the bottom.

[18 : 29] Right? So this is life under the curse, and we cannot save ourselves. So where does redemption come from? Where does hope come from? You may be familiar, I think most of you are, with C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, and one of the books is the book called The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

And in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, like any children's fairy tale, any good fairy tale, there is a curse. In fact, the entire land of Narnia is under a curse. And because of that curse, everything is cold, everything is dark, everything is frozen.

It's always winter, but it's never Christmas. Christmas never comes. And it's under a curse, and it's held in bondage to the villain who's the evil white witch.

And she has set herself up as the pretender to the throne, the false ruler of Narnia. And so one of the characters, Edmund, falls under the spell of the white witch.

You know, he gives in to his pride and his self-pity and his grandiosity. And as a result, he betrays his brother and sisters. And because of this act of betrayal, the white witch says, there is a deep magic in Narnia, a deep law that has been written into the stones themselves.

[19 : 46] And this deep magic says that anyone who commits such an act of treachery belongs to me. I get their blood. He's forfeited his life.

She has a hold on him. And there's seemingly no way out. And then Aslan, the lion, the god figure in this story, the true ruler of Narnia, he comes, and he alone knows that below and behind the deep magic is a deeper magic.

And he says, the witch can only see back to the beginning of time, but if she were able to see before time, before creation, she would know that before the foundations of the earth were laid, there was a deeper magic written into the fabric of reality itself.

And this deeper magic says this. The deeper magic says that when a willing victim who has committed no treachery is killed in the traitor's stead, the curse will be broken. And even death itself will start to work backwards.

And so, as many of you know, Aslan sacrifices himself on the stone table. And he breaks the curse. And he rescues Edmund. And death begins to work backward and he comes back to life.

[20 : 56] And then he is able to liberate Narnia from the curse that has held it enslaved for so long. It's a great story. And what I want you to understand, the reason I'm telling you this story is because Paul is saying something very similar here to the Jews.

You know, the law is like the deep magic. And the Jews point back to Moses and they say, God gave Moses the law and we live under the law. That's how to be blessed. That's how to save ourselves and escape the curse.

And Paul says, no, no, no, no. There's a deeper magic. Don't you see? And he points them all the way back to Abraham. And I think further still, all the way back to before the heavens and the earth were even created.

And he says, there's a deeper magic. It's the gospel. It's the gospel of grace. And he says, how do you think that your forefather, Abraham, how do you think that he gained the blessing of God?

Was it through the law? No, the law had not even been given. Then what happened? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

[22 : 01] It was an act of faith. Paul says, this is the deepest magic of all. It's the gospel. It's the gospel of grace that comes through faith. And here's the gospel. Verse 13, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

For it is written, curse it is everyone who is hanged on a tree. Paul says, don't you get it? You're dealing with the God whose eternal nature is to have mercy.

His plan all along was to send his son to become a curse. Now notice what it doesn't say. It doesn't say that Jesus paid the penalty for our sin.

It doesn't say that he paid what was due. He paid the debt. It doesn't say that he experienced part of the curse, the part that he would have experienced if he were one of us.

It says he became the curse. Now honestly, most commentators don't really get into what that means because it's very strong language.

[23 : 06] He didn't just pay the penalty for the curse. He became the curse. Now what does that mean? He says something similarly mysterious in 2 Corinthians 5.21. God made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us.

Here's the best I can do to help you understand what this means. Every single thing that we have ever done against God, every time we've yelled at our kids, every time we've wished somebody was dead, every time we fantasize about committing adultery with somebody, every time we've done anything like that, every time every evil was ever committed, every time a gun was ever fired that ended a life, every time a crime was ever committed or an act of racism or injustice was perpetrated on another human being, every time any sin was ever committed, God treated Jesus as though he were personally responsible for each and every act of sin that has ever been committed.

The full weight, the full crushing weight of that curse, that global curse, slammed down on Jesus on the cross. And remember what we said a little while ago about the ultimate end of those who are cursed.

You know, when does Jesus cry out? He doesn't cry out when the nails go into his hands. Jesus cries out when in his heart he feels that break for the first time and he realizes that he's been cut off.

He's been alienated. And he experiences the full pain of eternal alienation. Jesus is cast into the outer darkness and he cries out in pain and agony and fear and dread.

[24 : 46] But then as Jesus died and then as death began to work backwards and then as Jesus rose from death we see the same thing that the curse was broken, the curse was lifted and those who had no hope began to gain hope.

Right? What happens in all of the great myths and fairy tales? People can't save themselves. They need something or someone of immense power to save them from the curse. And so they need either an act of divine intervention or they need true love's kiss or they need somebody of royal blood.

And don't you see? Right? None of these stories are true in themselves but they all point to the one great story, the deeper story that is true. Right? Jesus is God intervening in history.

Jesus is true love's kiss. Jesus is one with royal blood but not just the prince. He's the king. Right? And unlike Vishnu who is cursed to become a human being, Jesus joyfully took on human flesh.

Not because he was cursed but in order to end the curse. This is the story under all of the stories. The one true story from which all of the great stories around the world derive themselves.

[26 : 01] So those who put their faith in Jesus Christ rather than their own self-salvation projects are set free from the curse and this is Paul's great point. But then Paul goes on and says something even more amazing.

It doesn't just stop there. Such people aren't just set free to go on their merry way. They're set free and then they are blessed. Because remember what we said at the very beginning. God created the world to need human vocation, to need human beings to work and to serve in the world, right?

And so the entire purpose of salvation is to restore to us that vocation. And so then God has to bless us and empower us to take up that mantle again. And so what does he do?

He sends the Holy Spirit. God's blessing, right? Verse 14. So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith.

Thousands of years earlier God had come to Abram and said I'm going to build of you a great nation and from your offspring, through your offspring I will bless all of the nations. We've seen that blessing come to pass through Jesus and the pouring out of God's spirit on his people.

[27 : 13] And the Bible says that the resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit are the first signs we have that the curse has lost its power and that it's fading.

that one day night is going to give way to dawn. One day winter will give way to spring. In Narnia once Aslan comes everything begins to change.

And my favorite scene in the book is this point where the White Witch and her dwarven thrall and Edmund who's still by her side and utterly hopeless by this point they're racing in the sled that she travels in because it's been snow and ice for as long as anyone can remember.

So they're racing along the sled and all of a sudden the sled begins to slow down because it's getting slushy. And here's what it says. Every moment the patches of green grew bigger and the patches of snow grew smaller.

Every moment more and more of the trees shook off their robes of snow. Soon wherever you looked instead of white shapes you saw the dark green of firs or the black prickly branches of bare oaks and beeches and elms.

[28 : 28] Then the mist turned from white to gold and presently cleared away altogether. Shafts of delicious sunlight struck down on the forest floor and overhead you could see a blue sky between the treetops.

Faster, faster said the witch. There was no trace of fog now. The sky became bluer and bluer and now there were white clouds hurrying across it from time to time.

In the wide glades there were primroses. A light breeze sprang up which scattered drops of moisture from the swaying branches and carried cool delicious scents against the faces of the travelers.

The trees began to come fully alive. The larches and birches were covered with green. The laburnums with gold. Soon the beech trees had put forth their delicate transparent leaves.

As the travelers walked under them the light also became green. A bee buzzed as it crossed their path. This is no thaw said the dwarf suddenly stopping.

[29 : 33] This is spring. What are we to do? Your winter has been destroyed I tell you. This is Aslan's doing.

When God's people in faith and the power of the Holy Spirit act in God's name and do the good work of justice and mercy in this world these are signs that the winter has ended that the curse has been lifted and that spring is on its way.

when we take in foster children through DC 127 who need homes that's when you see the ice beginning to break apart.

You know when we humble ourselves and ask forgiveness when we do the hard work of trying to understand and even love our enemies when we are willing to forgive seemingly unforgivable hurt and pain the sun is starting to shine through the trees when we invite strangers into our home so that they might become friends and even family the grass is beginning to push up through the permafrost when we do the hard work of racial reconciliation humbling ourselves listening repenting the flowers are beginning to bloom when we care for immigrants or refugees or young children who need mentors when we as the church do all of these things be very clear on this point when we do all of these things we're not trying to end the curse we are declaring that the curse has been ended right we live in a world that feels dark and it feels cold and it feels frozen most of the time but though the world still feels dark and cold it is only a matter of time the night will give way to the dawn the winter will give way to spring and so our job as the church our calling our holy purpose is to stand in the darkness and to point to the western horizon let's pray the king to the south and the north where the light will give way and automotive is to ■■■■ to the earth and to other beings and one to the earth