

A Tribute to Bob Heerspink

DAVE BAST

On October 1, 2011, less than three months after he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, our friend Bob Heerspink died; or as the Apostle might have said: He fell asleep in Jesus. In today's *Groundwork* program, we mourn Bob's death and honor his memory while digging into the word of God Bob Heerspink loved so much.

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast; and if you are a regular listener to *Groundwork*, you know that immediately after that you would have heard another voice say, "and I am Bob Heerspink;" or sometimes it would have been, "I am Bob Heerspink," and I would chime in, "I am Dave Bast." Bob Heerspink was my friend, and he was the co-host of this *Groundwork* program; we started it together. What you may not know is that he was also the director of Back to God Ministries International, the media ministry arm of the Christian Reformed Church in North America; and my day job is as president of Words of Hope, which is a ministry affiliated with the Reformed Church in America. So, we were two friends, but we were also directors of two separate organizations from two different denominations; very close and similar to be sure, but still separate; and part of the beauty of this project was the cooperative nature of this ministry. Bob and I worked together in far more, though, than just the *Groundwork* program. We also traveled internationally together as our organizations began to work more and more closely in partnership throughout the world, helping Christians in some of the hardest places in the world to use broadcasting and other media in order to share the love of Christ.

Well, not long after we recorded our last series of programs in May 2011, having planned to take a break over the summer, Bob experienced some discomfort and some pain, and after going to the doctor, it emerged that he was suffering from pancreatic cancer – a terrible disease. Bob threw himself into treatments. As we would get together over the course of the summer, he talked about, very humanly, how difficult it was – how much he struggled with this; like everyone – like all of us, he asked, "Why?" Like most of us, he wanted to live, and he felt like he still had more to do in the kingdom. He loved his family. I remember him saying to me once, "You know, I would love to be able to walk my daughter down the aisle someday;" and so it was painful in every sense of the word. It was a very difficult and poignant time; and people prayed; around the world, people poured out themselves in prayer for Bob's healing; and in the end, the answer that the Lord gave was, "No, not in that way."

There is a passage at the end of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that came to my mind as this whole experience was unfolding. Almost at the end of the story, when Christian's wife is completing her pilgrimage, a messenger comes from the Celestial City and he gives her a letter that says this: Hail, good woman. I bring thee tidings that the Master calleth for thee, and expecteth that thou shouldst stand in his presence in clothes of immortality within this ten days. When he had read this letter to her, he gave her therewith a sure token that he was a true messenger and was come to bid her make haste to be gone. The token was an arrow with a point sharpened with love, let easily into her heart, which by degrees wrought so effectually with her that at the time appointed she must be gone.

It struck me that Bob's illness was just that, what Bunyan describes. It was an arrow; it was painful; it was hard to deal with; but it was sharpened by love; and in the end the message for Bob was: Come home. It is time.

Bob also sent a message out. Just a few hours before he died, he asked his wife to post to all his friends and all those who were praying throughout the world these words: Good-bye to all my dear friends around the world till we meet again in our heavenly Father's kingdom. Remain steadfast in your faith and love. God be with you all.

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast. Joining me now is Art Schoonveld. Art is a retired pastor in the Christian Reformed Church. He is a long-time friend of Bob's, one of his oldest friends; and was also given the privilege by Bob's family of speaking personally at his funeral, sharing some reminiscences about Bob; and I wanted to do that in this program, too; not just talk about Bob the preacher or Bob the teacher, but Bob the man, Bob the husband, Bob the follower of Jesus Christ. So Art, thank you so much for being willing to join us on *Groundwork* for this very special conversation.

ART SCHOONVELD

Sure; thank you for inviting me.

DAVE BAST

I think probably most of the people who listen never met Bob or did not know him. How would you describe Bob Heerspink, the human being – the man?

ART SCHOONVELD

Well, Bob was just kind of a special person. He was real; I guess authentic is the term that is often used, but what you saw was what you got. Bob respected people; he liked people; he was a listener, an encourager; and the first time we met about 24 years ago, just the way he came across, I just thought what a real person – what a person to have as a friend; and so that is really how it developed.

DAVE BAST

The phrase that came to my mind as I was thinking; you know, that line that Jesus used of Nathaniel: A true Israelite in whom there is no guile.

ART SCHOONVELD

Exactly; that is exactly what he was.

DAVE BAST

You know, Bob was like that – you know, nothing phony. One of the problems with us as pastors – let's be honest – is sometimes a phony piety, or we want to appear more holy than we are; but Bob was real.

ART SCHOONVELD

He was, all the way through.

DAVE BAST

You got to know him many years ago when you were both serving in pastoral ministry, and Bob did that for most of his career, really. He was serving as pastors of churches.

ART SCHOONVELD

Right; he served four congregations, and we met at Trinity Deerfield for a D.Min degree and then, of course, he became Back to God director and we continued our friendship.

DAVE BAST

How would you describe him as a pastor?

ART SCHOONVELD

Any person that you talk to that was a member of one of his congregations would tell you in a minute, but both he and his wife, Edie, were just very caring people; and not in a phony way. They really were interested in what was happening in peoples' lives, and they were always there for people – that was just the beautiful thing; and they really worked as a team, both Bob and Edie, and I think that people would tell you that. Even in the Back to God Ministry, I think Edie was just so vitally interested in what Bob was doing, and I

sometimes would jokingly say to her: Edie, you know so much about all of this, and she really did, but they really were a team.

DAVE BAST

Edie had her own career... has her own career. She is an artist and an art teacher at a local school.

Interesting tidbit: One of the series of programs that we did related to the fact that Edie teaches at a local middle school, and a number of the students – 8th grade students – submitted their questions about God, and Edie told us about this exercise that another teacher did. So we did a series of *Groundwork* programs trying to answer these 8th grader questions about God. They were not easy...

ART SCHOONVELD

That is great.

DAVE BAST

Some of them were tough.

Let's talk about Bob the theologian, Bob the Bible teacher, Bob the student of scriptures and expositor and preacher and teacher.

ART SCHOONVELD

Well, you know, I used to say to Bob, "Bob, you are really brilliant." He had the ability to look at a Bible passage and to really get out of it what some of us might miss; but not only was he brilliant – and I think he was a very good theologian because of his analytical mind – but he was able to pass it on to ordinary people like myself so that actually it became a very practical kind of a thing.

DAVE BAST

But it was a sort of approach that said let's apply the Bible to all of life.

ART SCHOONVELD

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

And the big story of the Bible... I remember Bob and I actually did quite a bit of international travel together because our ministries are working more and more closely together in various parts of the world, and in the last couple of years we sort of took this show on the road, if we can call it that way, where we team-taught a two or three-day seminar on a biblical life and world view, or as we sometimes say, a Reformed life and world view, but it is really the Bible. The bigger picture – it is not just individual souls being saved, as important as that is; but the story of creation, fall, redemption, and renewal – the renewal of all things – the new creation.

ART SCHOONVELD

Right; and Bob had a way, as you put it, to unpack that. My wife and I loved to hear him preach because he had the ability to... For instance, we listened to a couple of sermons on the book of Revelation, and Bob just was able to take that to really teach you certain things, but at the same time tell you what it meant for us in our everyday life, and that is where I think... that is the kind of theologian he was, that he understood it; he studied it; he was very well read, as I am sure you know; and he was able to pass that on to the people in their everyday lives, and that is what I appreciated about him.

DAVE BAST

You know, one of the things that struck me about him was that he was so interested in psychology; not just theology; and I think it was because he cared about people and that practical application. It was not just sort of ivory tower, dry academic, theoretical; it was what happens in my struggles in my life, in my own mind, in my spirit, my psychology. Well, the Gospel speaks to that, too.

ART SCHOONVELD

Right; and I think that is what made him what I refer to as being real; that he was very honest talking about himself – his own feelings – his own struggles or questions that came to his mind; and he was very honest during his illness, too, that this was not an easy thing; that even though he knew as a Christian he would be with the Lord, it was very hard to accept that for him, even though... of course he was able to let go, but that is what I liked about him, that he never gave you the impression that he was above anybody else – that he was any closer to the Lord than anybody else. That is just how he was.

DAVE BAST

I remember one summer afternoon sitting together in his living room, and him saying: Yes, you know, you would like to have more time; and you wonder why? Why now, when things are going so well? Yes, in the end, as you say, he did submit.

ART SCHOONVELD

He did.

DAVE BAST

The other thing I think this speaks to is his groundedness. He had his feet solidly and firmly in the Word, and he was not sort of blown here and blown there, or taken in. How can I put this delicately? He could sniff out garbage, let's say, or nonsense when somebody was spouting it.

ART SCHOONVELD

Oh, yes; he could see right through that; and again, you know we said that already, but that is the thing that I appreciated about him so much. He was so honest, and he was always respectful of other people; but at the same time, he was willing to confront.

DAVE BAST

You were sharing at the funeral about an experience you just had with Bob, where he was able to kind of see through some of the issues. You remember that wry smile that he had; he would get that grin on his face and kind of set the record straight.

ART SCHOONVELD

Right; I call it a half smile... because one of those days that I was at his house and we were talking and I was just sharing with him something that was happening to me, and how I was going to respond, and he just looked at me with that smile and he said, "Art, you are just so wrong about that;" and I said, "You think so?" And he said, "Oh, yeah, I know it." And that is friendship, I think; when people are willing to correct you, and not in a nasty way, but to just say: You know what? You shouldn't do that.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and people whose judgment is sound and whom you respect who have real wisdom.

ART SCHOONVELD

Exactly; right.

DAVE BAST

I don't know if you are willing to share this or not, Art, because I know it might be hard – it is personal; but you were there at the end. You had the inestimable privilege of being with Bob and his family when he breathed his last. Can you describe that scene?

ART SCHOONVELD

I think that would be okay with Edie, if I did describe that. Around 9:00 - quarter to 9 on Saturday morning, she called us – she called me on my cell phone, and she said, “Would you guys come?” Which was really an answer to prayer because I had been thinking: I really would like to go, but I don’t want to be intrusive...

DAVE BAST

It is really hard, isn’t it? Yes... because it is a sacred moment and it is... the family, you know; do they want to be alone?

ART SCHOONVELD

Right, exactly; and so I was not sure, and I was thinking about that, and so I thought, well I will go about 10:30 or 11:00 to the hospital, and then the Lord kind of answered that prayer that I was half thinking; and so Edie called on the cell phone, and all she said, “Would you guys please come?” And that included my wife; so I said we would be there as soon as we can. So we came there and it turned out to be the last hour of Bob’s life, and I have called those – and I don’t know if that is a cliché or not, but I call those sacred moments. We were really standing on sacred ground – on holy ground.

DAVE BAST

holy ground – Beulah land.

ART SCHOONVELD

And when we walked in the family was already there: Edie and the kids and Bob’s father, and also his brother and his brother’s wife; and when we walked in, Mr. Heerspink, Bob’s dad, was reading from a chapter from the Gospel of John, and we just stood there and we just listened, and then Edie... even though she was just so sad, of course, but she was able to ask different people to read a certain chapter; and she asked, I believe it was Psalm 71, and we just stood around the bed and...

DAVE BAST

And turned to the scriptures.

ART SCHOONVELD

Turned to the scriptures, and that was just so special. So, the sister-in-law read Psalm 71 after Mr. Heerspink had finished reading the chapter from John, and then I read Psalm 116; and then we sang; and Edie led us in the singing; and as far as the quality of the singing, well we were just...

DAVE BAST

Never was it more heartfelt, whatever the vocal cords did.

ART SCHOONVELD

Exactly, and some of us had to quit singing at times, but it was... I just cannot really describe it; and it was such a privilege, and I just mean it with all my heart. Even as hard as it was, that the family allowed – that Edie allowed us to be part of that and to actually sing Bob into the arms of Jesus. It was just awesome. I have no words to describe it, and I hope it that does not get cheapened by me saying this.

DAVE BAST

I don’t think it does at all. As you were sharing that, I was thinking of this program. You know, our slogan is: This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture as the foundation for our lives; and talk about living that right to the end. It was the foundation for his death, too.

I want to thank our special guest today, Reverend Art Schoonveld, who joined us to share in this unique *Groundwork* program, remembering Bob Heerspink and bearing witness to his life and ministry; and Art, it was a pleasure. Thanks so much. We couldn’t have done it without you.

ART SCHOONVELD

Thank you for asking me. I really feel honored to have been here.

DAVE BAST

We mentioned Psalm 116. As it turns out, one of the last programs Bob and I did together was from Psalm 116, and Edie quoted in her last message to all the praying friends Psalm 116:15: Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints; but ironically, in our program we focused earlier, where it talks about the deliverance. You know, the psalmist is threatened by death and it has got it's hold on him, and he is delivered when he cries out, and he says:

What shall I render to the Lord for all his thanks? And then this strange juxtaposition of, but wait a minute – death. Except that we understand sometimes the Lord does deliver us, not *from* death, but *through* death. Bob and I talked a little bit about that in that program. Let me share a bit of that conversation right here.

RECORDED SEGMENT

BOB HEERSPINK

I cannot read this psalm and read those words without going to the Last Supper and seeing Jesus lift that cup, and saying, “This is my blood shed for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” That somehow this psalm is pushing forward right to the very core of our reason for gratitude in the sacrifice – the death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

And to receive him – to receive is salvation, I should say, is to receive him. The best gift of all is the gift of the giver himself that God gives us, and if we don't receive that gift, in the end nothing else matters, you know? We are all going to die anyway.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; this psalm really forces us to look at why should you be grateful? And it is wonderful to be grateful for all God's physical gifts and all the blessings he gives, but ultimately, if we haven't received the cup of salvation – if we do not have Christ – we have missed the ultimate reason for giving thanks.

END RECORDED SEGMENT

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast. One of the striking things, I think, in the New Testament is the way the book of Acts comes to a conclusion. It has followed for much of its time the career of the Apostle Paul, and we have become wrapped up in his life and in his travels, and he goes here and there throughout the ancient Roman Empire, and all sorts of things happen to him; and finally he makes it to Rome, which has been his great goal all throughout; and he gets there and he is being held under a kind of house arrest, and at the end of Acts it says that Paul lived there two whole years at his own expense, preaching boldly the word of God without hindrance; and then it stops, and you think: What happens next? Wouldn't we like to have Acts Part 2 that tells us how Paul came out of it, or did he, or didn't he? And then we stop and realize: But Paul is not really the hero of the story; the hero of the story is the Gospel itself, and our voices as servants rise and fall; they come and they go; and eventually they are all stilled in one way or another. Bob's voice has now been stilled here on earth. He continues to praise the Lord in heaven; and one day my voice will be stilled as well; whether later, or perhaps sooner. I think we have learned if nothing else that here at *Groundwork* we will say, “If God wills,” whenever we make any plans for the future; and we are planning for the future. This does not mean the end of this radio program. We believe it has value and that it serves an important purpose in digging into the word of God. So in the coming weeks we will have a variety of voices on the air with me as guests, and eventually we will see where that leads in the future as God wills; but meanwhile, in this special program we wanted to give the last word to Bob. Sometime ago he preached a sermon about eternal life, and we have taken a few important excerpts from the conclusion of that message that we would like to share with you now.

BOB NEERSPINK

Now let me tell you something important about this life of eternity that Christ offers. Eternal life begins today. A lot of people think that eternal life begins sometime in the future; maybe at best after you die and go to heaven; but that is not what Jesus says. Jesus says this *is* eternal life, to know God. If you know God through Jesus, life begins here and now. You don't wait for tomorrow; you don't wait for heaven. Eternal life is now. Have you experienced that life through your relationship with Christ? In the midst of crisis, have you experienced a strength that is beyond anything you could marshal from your own resources? In the midst of sorrow, have you experienced a comfort that defies your present grief? Have you ever opened the scriptures and been given a peace that seems to lift you out of your present struggles into a world of shalom? Then you have tasted the real life that comes from being in relationship with God; and if you have tasted those things, then you know that with regard to eternal life there is more to come. For those who taste the life of God today, know that physical death has lost its sting and that even greater life with God awaits us. Most of us shiver at the word death. We have discovered our mortality as we grow older, and we tremble; but if you know God today through faith in his Son Jesus Christ, then death need no longer terrify you. The grave on Easter morning was open. The way to life has been cleared. Says the Apostle Paul: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or nakedness or danger or sword? Now in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. That is our confidence. All of us want to live, and here is the good news. That Easter life is something that begins here and now and continues on with God forever in an eternity of community with him.

DAVE BAST

As it always has been, *Groundwork* is a conversation. We want to hear from you, and especially in response to this special program. There is a memorial page that you can access by clicking the story about Bob on our website, groundworkonline.com. While there, read some of the beautiful tributes to the life of ministry of Bob Heerspink, and add a comment or message of your own. Again, you can find a link to this page at groundworkonline.com.

We will miss you, Bob; till we meet in the kingdom of God.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/a-tribute-to-bob-heerspink>

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