

Deserve Death, Receive Life

DAVE BAST

If you were asked for an explanation of the world's problems, what would your answer be? If you were to suggest a cure, what would you prescribe? Lots of answers have been proposed to those questions, but the answers the Bible gives to them might surprise you; it might even offend you, and we will look at them today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, we are in the second program of what is planned to be a five-part series on texts that have the little conjunction *but* in them; kind of a U-turn word; we are calling it bad news/good news. You make a statement and that is true and it seems to lead in one direction, but the little word *but* turns it in an entirely different way; and there are some wonderful passages or verses in the Bible that do that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in this particular program, Dave, we are going to look at something that comes pretty close to the heart of the whole thing, and that is: What is salvation and where does it come from; but, just as importantly, why does it have to come?

DAVE BAST

Right; and so, the text for today is Romans 6:23. This is a very famous verse; you may have heard it before; you may know it by heart, and it goes like this:

²³The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. So, that really is the ultimate bad news/good news. Bad news: Death. Sin. That is us. We are doomed. Good news, incredibly, is that God somehow has found a way to overcome that problem and to grant us eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, says the apostle.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one of the main things that we are going to ponder in this particular program, Dave – and we should say, too, that this particular program is going to deal in some fairly heavy theology; when you get deep into Romans, you cannot avoid it; but one of the things that that text you just read from Romans 6:23 means is that for that good news to be good – for that free gift of God to be welcomed by you – you have to take the first part of the verse, too, which is the bad news; which is, we are really bad off. What is interesting about our world today, and this has been true for a while, I suppose, is that we are not always so willing to take the bad news; we are not always so willing to admit... We would rather be optimists. You know, a century ago, or a little longer ago than that, as the 20th Century dawned and technology was taking off, the Industrial Revolution was in full cry; we were starting to invent incredible things like the telephone and automobiles, and soon, airplanes; and people thought for a while: Hey, on our own, we human beings are making a better world. We are going to eradicate crime. We are going to eradicate poverty. We are going to eradicate war. A golden age is coming and technology and human knowhow and science will lead the way; and then the 20th Century got rolling and not so much.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, there was a phrase to describe people back then that is still much used today; they are called progressives, and the idea was life is progressing; it is gradually getting better; and in some ways it is; physically, certainly. The problem is, morally we do not seem to be progressing very much; so, if you ask what is wrong with the world; what is wrong with people; why do they do the things they do; it is indisputable that something is wrong. A lot of people will say: Well, the cause is poverty. If we could only lift everyone up and have enough, but then you see example after example of people who have everything, who are incredibly wealthy, and who are still awful people who do awful things. Or the problem is education – it is lack of education – and if we could only get our...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or just understanding each other. Back in the 1970s, coming out of the 60s yet, there was this advertisement for Coke where this lone woman starts with a bottle of Coke, singing: I would like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony...

DAVE BAST

In perfect harmony, yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then you see people from all races, and it is like: Well, Coca Cola will bring us together...

DAVE BAST

I would like to give the world a Coke...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, if we could just all... we'll get along. And, well, no; it does not happen this way. So, the 20th Century – bad; World War I – horrible; World War II – way worse; and then the Korean War and the Vietnam War, and...

DAVE BAST

Genocide... and riots...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Then genocide and Rwanda, and then we get into the 21st Century, and people thought: Well, maybe we will reboot. And then we are what? A year in, not even, and we get 9/11 and terrorism has been taking off since then, and now we have ISIS and terrible things in the Middle East and war and it is not getting any better, and it is not going to on our own.

DAVE BAST

Right. In answer to that question: What is wrong with the world? It reminds me of a famous anecdote I read years ago; that very question was being debated in the Letters to the Editor section of the London Times – the great newspaper – and so, people were weighing in with all kinds of opinions on what is wrong with the world, and finally, a very famous Christian writer named G. K. Chesterton sent a letter to address that question, what is wrong with the world; and it said simply this: Sir, I am.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Great story.

DAVE BAST

And that really is the Christian explanation in a nutshell. What is wrong with the world? We are. The problem is us. The problem is in our nature, and that is also exactly what the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is particularly right out of the shoot – right out of the gate in Romans 1 – we have been looking at that Romans 6:23 text – let's back up five chapters, in Romans 1, and Paul has the normal greetings to the Romans in his preamble, and he talks about the power of the Gospel is the power of God to save Jews and Greeks alike – everybody, in other words – but then he gets to Romans 1:18, and he has to loop back to the bad news. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness; and then a little farther down: For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals, and he goes on; but what Paul is saying there is something we still see in the world today, and that is it is not that we did not know the truth, it is not that we do not have access to the truth, we suppress it. We repress it. We tamp it deep, deep, deep down and do not think about it because we do not want to... You know the comic strip character, Pogo, from the 1970s, we have met the enemy and he is us. We do not like that. We do not want to be the enemy. We do not want to join G. K. Chesterton and say: I am the problem. So, we repress it, Paul says; we suppress it; we tamp it down and say: No, that is not me. I am okay; and we will be okay if we just work harder.

DAVE BAST

And if you look at his analysis of what has gone wrong, where we went off the rails, and this is true for all of us – we are kind of born this way – this is now the default human position: Our problem is not essentially intellectual. It is not that we do not have enough information to believe in God. It is not that we lack knowledge, because Paul underscores the fact that it is pretty obvious if you just look at the world around you, that there is a God; there is a creator; but our minds have been darkened now because we have turned away from God. Our problem is essentially moral, not intellectual. We did not want to worship God. We did not want to acknowledge him as God; and now, often we cannot reason our way through to the conclusion that God is real, and instead we have turned and engaged our hearts and our affections and our worship on created things. That is the essence of idolatry. To put something that is created as first in your heart; first in your life; and that is exactly what we see going on in the human race.

Scott Hoezee:

It is a hard message; it is hard to swallow; it is hard on all of us, and it gets just a little bit harder still, and we have to be able to accept that so we can get to the light of the good news. So, we will look a little bit more at the bad news so that we can really appreciate and celebrate the good news, and we will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at Romans 6:23, one of those great U-turn verses that starts out with bad news and then turns on the word *but* into a wonderful statement of the good news of the Gospel; so, it goes like this:

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord; and Scott, we have been looking at the background to this in the early chapters of Romans, where Paul sketches out the story of a fallen humanity that is kind of locked into godlessness and wickedness – those are the two words that he uses – as they have turned away from God and instead have become idol worshipers, worshipping created things; especially themselves; we would say most people have the little god of self at the center of their nature, of their person; but there is additional bad news, as Paul goes on to say, because God has done something as well. It is not just that we have turned away from God, but God has, as a result of our sin, done something to us that he talks about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; in that first chapter of Romans that we were looking at a minute ago, Dave, Paul does say at one point: Look, once we turned our back on God, we started what you could almost call a series of very bad momentum of moving further and further away from God, and God sort of handed us over to that. God said:

Well, your will be done, then. You do not want to say, ‘Your will be done, O God,’ so I am going to say to you, O human being, your will be done, and you are just going to keep getting worse if you try to do it on your own. If you stick to only your own abilities, you are going to make it a whole lot worse; and of course, we have, and we see that already in Genesis. We start out with one bad thing Adam and Eve do and the very next chapter we get murder – we get fratricide – and a few chapters on you get to this man who boasts about all of the murders that he has committed; and then we get to the Tower of Babel; I mean, things just get bad fast because God basically says: The bad momentum you started I am not going to stop immediately. You have to turn back to me, and then we will go from there.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, God gave them over, says Paul – an ominous phrase in Romans 1 – and then he kind of catalogues all of the wickedness; all of the sinful behaviors; including, he says at one point, people are disobedient to their parents, which sounds to us rather odd in a list along with murder and sexual immorality and all of that; but they are all symptoms of the underlying problem. Again, we want to qualify this because God has not completely abandoned his world. He never has. It is not all judgment. It is not unrelieved gloom and doom because there is such a thing as common grace, where if God truly did give us completely over and just step away, all that would be left – the world would be a hell, literally.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, ashes.

DAVE BAST

But nevertheless, there is this kind of added judgment that is expressed, and the point is, I think, unless we accept the bad news, we are not really going to care about the good news.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Frederick Buechner, the Christian preacher and author, once said that there is a sense in which the Good News – the Gospel of Jesus Christ – when you preach that, you are proclaiming a sheltering word; you are rebuilding a roof over peoples’ heads; but Buechner said: The only people who are really going to appreciate the fact that you are building them a new roof are the ones who are willing to admit that the old roof blew away; that the old roof was gone; that they were left unsheltered and unprotected.

I have used the analogy before, too, you know; if you get a water main break in your basement and your basement is filling up with water and the plumber shows up, you cannot wait to open the front door and let him in, but if you do not know you have a basement filling up with water and all of sudden there is a plumber on your porch, you will tell him to go away. “I do not need you.”

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, you have to know the trouble you are in to welcome gladly and with open arms, the solution; and that is really what Paul was saying; so do Calvinists, do Reformed people, do Christians generally, are we just real dour, downer people who are always talking about sin just for the sake of making people feel bad? No; we are just naming what is in the newspaper every day, but we are saying we have to know that the cause of that is our sinfulness, and God has a solution, and that solution is going to be wonderful to you if you know how bad the problem is in the first place.

DAVE BAST

Yes, another common way of describing it is to speak about sickness and cure. I mean, you are not going to go to the doctor and accept the regimen of medicine and rehab and therapy that he prescribes unless you are really in pain and really suffering, and know that you need it; it is the only way to help. So with this bad news/good news of the basic Gospel message: Paul says the wages of sin is death; and he does not just mean that we are going to be condemned to death because of our individual misdeeds. He does not say it is the

wages of *sins*, it is the condition – the underlying condition of sin – of being apart from God, estranged from God, and where that leads to is death, and not just in the future, but here and now. We are dead people now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That reminds me of what Paul also wrote to the Ephesians in Ephesians Chapter 2, where he says to the Ephesians: Look, you were dead – you were dead...

DAVE BAST

I think that is going to come up in a future program, because there is a great turn in that text as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but if you are dead... Talk to any funeral home director or mortician, they will tell you, the dead do not do anything for themselves; you really have to do everything for them because they are dead; they are not sick. I remember my high school teacher, Lew Vander Meer used the analogy: If you have a sick dog on the other side of the living room, you can call to him and see if he can get his way over to you. If you have a dead dog on the other side of the living room, you can call all day, he is not going to move; and Paul says spiritually that is where we are unless we are made alive again; and if you know you are dead, then the prospect of being made alive through the free gift of God is in our text for today – Romans 6:23 – what a wonderful piece of good news that is!

DAVE BAST

And that is what we want to look at in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and today we are looking at Romans 6:23, one of the great texts in the whole Bible: The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. So, yes, we have been focusing on the bad news part of that; sin, death, and even wrath – God's wrath is His righteous anger. One of the problems we get into in talking about these things is we are accused of being overly negative, of having this harsh, twisted view of God; isn't God a God of love? Well, in a very real sense, God's wrath is an expression of his love. I realize this is hard, but a couple of things we have to say about it: Number 1: God's wrath is not the same as our anger. He does not fly off the handle. He does not lose control of himself. He does not all of a sudden lose his temper. God's wrath is his settled opposition to evil, and the reason it is consistent with his love – it is even a component of his love is – imagine a world where God did not care about evil; where he was indifferent to injustice; where people could prey upon people and no consequences, nothing ever happened because there was no god who cared. Well, there were plenty of gods like that in the ancient world; the glory of the God of the Bible – the real God – is he does care and he will not let it go.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The great Jewish scholar, Abraham Heschel, once said in some of his classic works on the prophets – and the prophets, of course, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others – had to talk about the anger of God quite often; but Heschel pointed out, for one thing, unlike Zeus, or some Greek gods who were just perpetually mad and angry, God, in the Old Testament, is never called fundamentally angry, but for God wrath or anger is love offended; and so, it still – as you were just saying, Dave – it is still the love of God that is in the driver's seat all along; and if God is angry-seeming, it is because that love has been offended by something that offends God's holiness and that God cannot get mixed up with. Indeed, Dave, sometimes in life we know people who never get upset about anything. Their kids can do or say what they want, they just sort of smile and oh, you know, well, kids are kids, you know; well, okay. Sometimes you want to shake people like that and say: Don't you have any standards? Isn't there a bottom line for you? Don't you ever get upset about anything? Because somebody

like that seems kind of wimpy; seems like milquetoast; seems like, indeed, just does not have any moral spine. We really would not want a god like that, who could look at the worst things we do to each other – big things like genocide against whole races; but smaller things by which we wound each other – would we really want a god who just looked at all that and said, Nyah, okay; no worries. Ah, forget about it! That would not be much of a god.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, the real contrast here in this verse is between wages and gift, and those are actually picking up words that Paul has been riffing on earlier in Romans; in Chapter 4, for example, he draws up the story of Abraham as an illustration of how grace works, because grace means gift – the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus – that is grace. Wages is what you earn, so what Paul wants to say in the context of Abraham's story is: Look, how did Abraham receive God's stamp of approval? How was he declared righteous in God's sight? It was not through what he did, because if it were wages, then he would have earned it. When you go to work and you punch the clock and you put in your 40 hours, and then maybe you are asked to do some overtime, so you do that, too; at the end of the week when you get your pay, you do not say to the boss: Why, thank you. What a gift you have given me. This is so gracious of you. No; it is wages. You have earned it. So, what we have earned, Paul says, in our lives is simply death. That is what we have earned; that is what we deserve; that is what, if God is going to treat us fairly, He will give us...

Scott Hoezee/

DAVE BAST

But...

SCOTT HOEZEE

There it is; the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ, which you cannot earn, but it is there because, as we just said, God is loving all along; while we were yet sinners, he loved us. He did not wait for us to turn around and earn it; he loved us, and he gave us a gift in Jesus Christ. The sacrifice, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a gift of incalculable worth, and indeed, it is pure gift; and when you receive that gift and realize how undeserving you are and how you could never pay it back, that is where the Gospel takes hold, and that is where the joy and the rejoicing and the hopefulness for all of life comes from; that is where worship comes from; we just can never say thank you often enough.

DAVE BAST

So here is the basis for us if we are Christians – and I think this is what is really distinctive about the Christian faith – what kind of a relationship do you have with God? What kind of a relationship do you want with God? You can have a performance-based relationship, and that is what most people... Again, that is kind of the default position of the human race. If I do this and do this and do this, then God will do this for me. You try to perform; you try to do enough; it is transactional; it is tit for tat; it is a business relationship, right? And God says: All right, if that is the kind of relationship you want, you know what you are going to earn? And it is not good. But I am offering you, not a performance-based relationship, but a trust-based relationship with me if you receive the gift that I am willing to give you in Jesus Christ; the free gift of life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it will change everything. I was watching a television show, a situation comedy, a while back, in which the main character is an obsessive/compulsive man; very bright, but obsessive/compulsive, and he never likes to have any debt in his life. He always wants everything paid up. Well, he finds out that the woman who lives across the hall from him has bought him a Christmas present, and this upsets him very much because he does not want to be in debt to her. So he decides that he is going to go out and he buys three different presents for her of three different monetary values, and as soon as he gets his present from her, he is going to look it up on the Internet and find out: Is it \$25.00 or \$35.00 or \$45.00, and then he will give her the gift that is of the exact same value. Well, long story short, she gives him a gift which did not have a price attached to it. It was a napkin from the restaurant where she works as a waitress signed by this man's most favorite actor of all time, and he realizes: I cannot pay this back! So he gives her all three of the gift baskets and then he gives her

a hug – and he never hugs anybody – because all of a sudden he realizes there are some gifts you cannot pay back; you just have to receive it and let that be part of the relationship; and that is what Paul is saying: This is a gift that you do not deserve; you could not earn it; you only earn death; but it is a gift of incalculable worth, and it changes your whole life forever.

DAVE BAST

And the one thing, perhaps, that we should underscore as we are drawing near to the close of this program is the qualifier that Paul adds. It is a free gift of eternal life. A gift of grace unearned, undeserved – that is what a gift is – you have not earned it; but it is in Christ Jesus our Lord. For Paul, he can never separate the gift from the one who creates it, who offers it, who earns it, who gives himself in order to pacify the wrath of God – that is all in Romans as well – in Romans 5 and in Romans 6 – the death of Christ; Romans 3... Unpacking these incredible ideas how somehow Christ had to give himself in our place in order for the gift to be ours; so, it is in Christ that we find it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and that changed everything for Paul because we know from other parts of his writing he was Mr. Earn-My-Way-to-Heaven. He was convinced when he was a Pharisee that he could make God love him by keeping the Law; and then he met Jesus on the Damascus Road and everything changed; indeed, for Paul, as for anybody who gets that free gift, all of a sudden you realize: I never could have earned that because look what Jesus had to do? The Son of God died on a cross. I never could have done that myself. You can only, only receive it as a gift; and that is indeed what God gives to us.

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee. We would love to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into the scriptures, so we have a website: groundworkonline.com. Go there, and tell us topics and passages you would like to hear next on *Groundwork*.

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