

Free From the Curse

DAVE BAST

It can be difficult to maintain consistency in our spiritual lives. We strive to do what is morally right, yet our natural tendencies toward sin often derail our efforts. In Galatians, we are reminded that faith in Christ is what makes us right with God; but then, what good is following God's Law if it doesn't do anything to save us from our sinful nature? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

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

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, we have been following Paul's argument in his letter to the Galatians... how he hammers away at the Gospel – the real, authentic Gospel – at the heart of which is the message of justification by faith; that we are accepted before God, not on the basis of anything that we do... our morality, our religion, our good works; but simply through trusting in Jesus Christ. There is a problem here, though, with the tendency that all of us have to slip from this trust to a relationship again based on performance – based on works.

BOB HEERSPINK

As a pastor, I have had so many people in my office talking about the fact that even though they have begun in faith, they just cannot hold to that line. They start looking at their lives. They begin to take a look at whether they are being good enough now to really measure up with God, and I know their feelings because I struggle with the same things. You know, you go to God, you say: Lord, I have messed up. Forgive me; and okay, now I am forgiven; and then that tendency to say: Okay, now I can take it from here. I am okay. Watch me run...until the next time I fall.

DAVE BAST

Well, we also kind of flip that around. I remember... My brother was a pastor, and I remember a story he told me once of calling on a parishioner who was dying of cancer and in terrible pain and suffering; and as he approached the man's room he could hear him saying: I deserve it; I deserve it...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

That feeling that, boy, we just don't measure up, and it is all based on what we do, how well we do, and if we don't do well enough we ought to be punished for it.

BOB HEERSPINK

And even though we believe that Christ bore in his body the penalty for our sins, when bad things happen to us we tend to say: I had it coming; this is God's retribution for my sin. We just cannot let go of the fact that somehow we have to pay for at least something ourselves.

DAVE BAST

And Paul addresses this in Galatians. The Apostle, in Chapter 3, having just expressed so profoundly the real truth of justification by faith, and then his sense of a new life, a new nature through faith in Christ, the One who loved me and gave himself for me, goes on to chide the Galatians for slipping from this understanding, which they began with, into a performance oriented kind of spiritual life.

So he writes:

¹O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you... It is as though somebody has cast a spell on them, you know...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ²Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law or by hearing with faith?

And then he goes on a little bit later:

⁶Just as Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness, ⁷know then that it is those of faith who are the children of Abraham.

So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

BOB HEERSPINK

Paul is saying that having begun with the Spirit, we want to end with human effort; and for the Galatians, of course, that was returning to the ceremonial law. It was going back to eating kosher foods and circumcision and keeping Sabbath. I wonder about today, how do we begin with the Spirit and then go back to human effort? It certainly isn't by, for most of us, keeping ceremonial law.

DAVE BAST

No, I don't think so, but it certainly could be by the Christian equivalent of going to church more or less faithfully, of doing good works – trying to be a good person – being good to my neighbor – all good things...

BOB HEERSPINK

All good things.

DAVE BAST

I mean, for Jews keeping the Law was a good thing. Let's face it; they were obeying God under the terms of the Old Testament covenant – the old covenant before Christ. So yes, I think it is still very much with us today; or even if we are not overtly religious, just sort of the idea that you have to pretty much treat other people okay; as long as what you do doesn't hurt someone, it is probably okay. You shouldn't hurt yourself either; you know, the cult of physical fitness now; you cannot smoke or eat junk food or all that stuff. That is all bad; that is wrong; but as long as you are not hurting somebody, that is the basis of your acceptance with God.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Dave, I think a good question for us to ask ourselves to test to see whether we are going down this road is to ask the question: Do you enjoy your faith? Do you enjoy being a Christian? Even though being a Christian is a calling that challenges us time and time again, we should enjoy our faith; and someone who says to me: You know, I don't enjoy being a Christian because there are so many things I have to do and I keep on failing all the time. I fall on my face. To me that is a sign that someone is starting to drift away from grace to depending on their own actions...

DAVE BAST

Into legalism... kind of a bondage, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know, grace is such an unnatural thing. I think that is one of the reasons we tend to drift into legalism. Grace... The unmerited gift of God's favor is just something so amazing. It is not the way we live. I mean, we show up in a law court and the judge says: Well, did you break the law? You are going to pay the penalty. Did you not study, says the teacher: then you get a D. This notion that we can live in a relationship with God by grace alone – alone – is just so amazing that it takes a lifetime to believe it is true.

DAVE BAST

Just to anticipate another little bit ahead in Galatians, in Chapter 4, Paul talks about the difference between slaves and children: Sons of God versus slaves; and it reminds me of a story of John Wesley, who described his own conversion this way... He was a very religious guy. He was a pastor. He was a missionary in Georgia among the Native Americans; but all this time he didn't really have that joy in his Christian faith. It was kind of a bondage to him. He said of his conversion, when he really came to know Christ: I traded the faith of a slave for the faith of a son. I think to me that is a great question to ask: Do I have the faith of a child of God? Do I find joy in my relationship to him or is it a burden... this weight that I have to perform?

BOB HEERSPINK

And as Paul confronts the Galatians with that question, he brings us to Jesus. I just love the way he begins this chapter by saying: Look at Christ...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Look at him crucified; portrayed before your eyes. It is like Christ is on...

DAVE BAST

That was his preaching.

BOB HEERSPINK

Is on a billboard...

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

Here it is!

DAVE BAST

That was his message; he preached that to them. He is summarizing the Gospel that way: It is Christ crucified.

BOB HEERSPINK

And what we tend to do I think sometimes is we keep looking at ourselves in the way we try to earn God's favor still and we fixate on ourselves; and Paul says: Just knock it off! Knock it off and look to Jesus – look to him and be reminded of what this is all about – the cross of Christ.

DAVE BAST

And that is at the center; yes, right. The cross is at the center, and he is going to go on to address that in one of the most profound passages in all of Galatians – all of the New Testament; which we want to look at in

just a moment, but first we need to pause and take a break and remind you that it is listeners like you that really make *Groundwork* what it is. So we invite you to join our conversation by visiting us on the website at groundworkonline.com.

BOB HEERSPINK

There we are going to continue to reflect on today's conversation about what the meaning of the cross really is, and we would like to hear from you on that. We would like to have you share your thoughts. We would also like to ask you to share ideas for upcoming programs. We want to make this program your program. So visit us, leave us a note, and join the conversation at groundworkonline.com.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Bob, we have just seen that Paul asks us to focus our attention on the cross as the heart of the Gospel, and that is really the antidote to slipping from grace into works. It is by remembering that Jesus Christ was crucified for us, and that is really the message that he turns to in Chapter 3 now as he goes on.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; he basically says: Look at that billboard upon which you see Christ crucified and understand what it means; and that is key because just looking at a crucified man upon a cross, you know, that is open to a lot of different interpretations; but this is Paul's description of what is really happening on the cross. He says: ¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hung on a tree."

DAVE BAST

Curse, curse, curse... three times over he uses that word.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, to us today this is still tough language because all this business of curse, what does that really mean?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

We use curse as a way of describing cuss words.

DAVE BAST

It is a string of naughty words, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

But it is very real and very powerful in the world view of the Bible, and in some places today. We were in India recently together, and we met a wonderful servant of Christ named Rajesh Moncel. He told a story later of how he was coming from a village where a woman had put a curse on him, and he experienced as he was driving down the road temporary blindness and he almost crashed on his motorbike with his family, and he believes that that curse was real – that it actually affected him but God saved him.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, we have to recognize that there are principalities and powers out there that are evil in their scope, and they have real power; and you know, we do ministry in French Africa, where voodoo is very, very strong; and we hear similar stories of the power of a curse; but this is a different kind of curse, isn't it?

DAVE BAST

It is; it is. Paul says it is the curse of the law, so it comes from God; and that is an even more mindboggling idea, I think, to people today. The idea that God could curse someone or something; and in fact, as Paul says, that God cursed Jesus, his own Son? Wow. There is something that is uncongenial to modern thought; but according to the Apostle, it is part and parcel of the Gospel. In fact, imagine a scene in the First Century when the Gospel is being preached, and it is being preached in terms of Christ crucified – Christ dying on the cross; and some Jewish person hears that and immediately they exclaim: Well then, Jesus is cursed. And in fact, that seems to lie behind a text in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 12:3, where Paul says: No one can say Jesus is accursed if they are speaking by the Spirit of God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well...

DAVE BAST

Why would they say that?

BOB HEERSPINK

If you go back to the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy we are told that anyone who hangs upon a tree is cursed; and the notion is you are rejected by both heaven and earth. So, crucifixion is really the First Century equivalent of being hung upon a tree – rejected by men – rejected of God; and that is exactly what happened to Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

And think about this: When God declared in the Law in Deuteronomy that a hanged man on a tree was under his curse, do you think he knew by what means his Son would die?

BOB HEERSPINK

I think so.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; so, this whole thing is set up to express the reality that on the cross Christ bore the judgment of God for us upon sin.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

That is the Gospel message.

BOB HEERSPINK

Sin is so serious that when we break the Law it puts us under the curse of God; and Christ took upon himself that curse on Calvary.

DAVE BAST

The curse due to us, right, exactly. Again, an uncongenial idea for many modern people, but for those of us who are being saved, as Paul says in another context, it is the power of God – this message of the cross is the power of God because it tells us that we are accepted...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Finally, forever. Nothing we do can change that, really, or accomplish that for us. So again, foolish Galatians; foolish Christians. Why would you turn aside from this wonderful offer – from this reality – in order to strive on your own performance basis?

BOB HEERSPINK

But it does mean that we have to crucify our own pride because we cannot save ourselves. You know, Paul goes on in this passage to say: He redeems us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he has redeemed us by the curse, yes; *from* the curse.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; that word is actually a word that was used in Paul's day to talk about purchasing the freedom of a slave. That is a powerful picture of what Christ has done for us. I mean, we are slaves – we are slaves to sin. Christ by his death comes along and purchases our freedom; and again, one more time, it is not what you do. It is not what you do. It is all what Christ does for you. It is all grace.

DAVE BAST

But, then there is this other question, and Paul keeps coming back to it: Okay, but here is the Law as well. The Law pronounces the curse. Christ accepted that curse when he said in effect: I will drink the cup that my Father gives me. It was publicly proclaimed by the fact of his crucifixion. Incidentally, I think that is why the Jewish leaders wanted to turn Jesus over to the Romans. I don't know if you have ever thought about this, but it strikes me; they could have just murdered him... they could have killed him... gotten him out of the way; but they didn't want to just murder him, they wanted to discredit him by having the curse of the Law publicly attached to him through crucifixion...

BOB HEERSPINK

Interesting.

DAVE BAST

Yes; but then, what about the Law? Does it still have a role for us? Paul is going to come back to that, as we have to, in just a moment.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, we are in the heart of Paul's letter to the Galatians; the middle of the middle chapter, Chapter 3, and this tremendous passage where he talks about Christ on the cross becoming a curse on behalf of us; taking up the judgment of God on sin and bearing it on his own shoulders and paying the price. That is really the Gospel message; and it is all about this law idea – law and curse. That is what we have to pursue a little bit further, I think. What is the point of the Law exactly? And so he writes:

¹⁰All who rely on works of the law are under a curse, for it is written: Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the Law and do them. So, he starts out with a quote from Deuteronomy emphasizing this point.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right. Well, and then he goes on. ¹¹Now it is evident (he writes) that no one is justified before God by the Law; for the righteous shall live by faith. Okay, now he is into Habakkuk.

DAVE BAST

More Old Testament.

BOB HEERSPINK

More Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

But the Law, he says, is not of faith; rather, the one who does them shall live by them. That is from Leviticus. We have three verses, three quotations from different Old Testament writers.

BOB HEERSPINK

And all of that, then, establishes the fact that Christ redeemed us by the Law by becoming a curse for us upon the cross.

DAVE BAST

¹⁴So that (Paul concludes) in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, I think all those Old Testament quotes are really noteworthy, because so many people think this whole idea of justification by faith is Paul's creation, or maybe just a New Testament idea...

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that it doesn't have any connection to the Old Testament teaching.

DAVE BAST

People in the Old Testament were saved by obedience – by works. People in the New Testament – they are saved by faith.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; I have heard so many of my parishioners through the years say that. You know, it is so great that we are saved by faith because those poor Old Testament folks... well, they were saved by what they did; and this is just not the way it is.

DAVE BAST

You know, old covenant/new covenant; it is true. That is valid terminology; but it doesn't mean two different ways of salvation.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, because grace overarches it all; and I think that is one of the reasons Paul talks about Abraham, because Abraham is his model of justification by faith.

DAVE BAST

So he is saying two things here really. He is saying this is the teaching of the revealed word of God in the Old Testament – in the Prophets and the Law; and it is also the lesson – the life lesson – that Abraham, our ultimate forefather in the faith... the father of the faithful... it is the lesson of his life, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; even though he was someone who in many ways walked with God, he is a model of discipleship; yet his salvation was totally on the basis of grace through faith; and the Law, in fact, for Abraham was given 430

years later. So, the Mosaic Law wasn't even around at the time of Abraham. It is all grace; it is all faith.

DAVE BAST

And you just think about his example. What happened first in his life? First God called him...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he responded to that call by faith, before he ever did anything... In fact, Paul picks up on the... some place he picks up on the example of circumcision, that Abraham wasn't circumcised until years later: The great sign of obedience to the Law came way after faith; and so, the point is, if you... in effect, you have a choice. You can choose to be justified by the works of the law, but what you are going to get that way is only curse... only judgment; or you can choose to follow the example of Abraham, to follow the teaching of scripture – Old Testament and New Testament. Put your faith in Christ – put your trust in God; and accept the grace that justifies us through Christ's death on the cross.

BOB HEERSPINK

But now there is a problem, and Paul knew that, too. What do you do with the Law? Why was it there in the first place? I mean, if Abraham is saved by faith, and that took place hundreds of years before the Law, why did the Law show up and make its appearance in God's saving plan?

DAVE BAST

Well, and it is one of the arguments that was consistently leveled against Paul. Paul is anti-law. Paul totally rejects the Law. You might kind of get that impression if you just read up to this point in Galatians. It is pretty negative about the Law, but Paul really does have a positive use for the Law as well.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and he states it. He gives us the reason for the Law in Chapter 3:24. He says: So then, the Law was our guardian until Christ came in order that we might be justified by faith. The Law was our guardian; and the word he uses there, Dave, is a word that was used of a slave who would accompany a young boy on his rounds as he made his way from tutor to tutor. The guardian – this slave – was to make sure that no problems happened to the child; that he was safe; and it was really kind of building a hedge around that young man as he grew up; and the Law operated... and I think in a sense still operates in the same way. It builds a hedge and it points us to Jesus.

DAVE BAST

I was trying to think of an example – a modern analogy for this that we could relate to, and I thought of maybe the Law as a school bus. The Law is a school bus that carries us to Christ before we know, really, the heart of the Gospel – before we know how it all works. Somehow when we strive to be good people, we try to do what is right, we try to keep... I mean the *real* rules, not petty rules, not this or that legalism, but try to love other people, try to be a good person, and we fail. We don't have it in us, and somehow, that realization may push us toward the free grace of God in Christ. Perhaps we should add that on this school bus the driver has a whip in his hand and he can sting us, because that pedagogue – that *paidagogós* – that slave...

BOB HEERSPINK

That is right; that is what it is called.

DAVE BAST

He was also given the authority to beat the children when they... It was a tougher time, you know. They didn't believe in nonviolence with kids. He was a disciplinarian. Some versions translate it that way; the Law is a disciplinarian. It can beat us and beat us down.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and the Law does that. I mean, when we think about the ways we fall on our faces, it hurts – it stings. You know, we think about the kind of person we should be and we are not; and the point of all that is not merely to say: I must try harder to please God. It is: I need to go to Jesus. I need to come to the foot of the cross. I need to recognize that this curse that I feel bearing on me is a curse that I cannot carry and I cannot deal with on my own. I need to give it to Jesus because he is the only one who can set me free.

DAVE BAST

Perhaps we could put it this way: In this sense for Paul the Law is negative in function. It hurts us. It makes us feel guilty. It reveals our sin to us. It is like a mirror, Calvin once said, in which we can see what we truly are; but it is positive in purpose – negative in function, positive in purpose – because the positive intent is to lead us out of that guilt into the freedom of acceptance with God on the basis of faith in Christ.

BOB HEERSPINK

We would like to thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation; and don't forget it is listeners like you that ask questions and participate on our website that keep the topics that we discuss relevant for your life. So let us know what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear about in the future. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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Printed on July 26, 2025