

The Curse of the Cross

DARRELL DELANEY

In the 18th Century, Sir Isaac Watts wrote a song that would become one of the Christmas season's staple songs: *Joy to the World*. In the third verse it says: No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found. This curse that is mentioned in the song is what we would like to talk about on today's episode of *Groundwork*; and what Christ has done to set us free from that curse is what we would like to expound upon; so, stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in the second episode of our seven-part Lenten series, where we talk about the implications of the atonement of Christ. We want to talk about why the cross; we want to talk about the importance of it; and how it affects our everyday lives. In the first episode, we did unpack *why*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The why? Because something broke—something went terribly wrong...seriously wrong...cosmically wrong; and so, it was going to require some sort of a cosmic fix to set things to right again, to balance the books of justice. God is a just God, a righteous God, a holy God. He cannot abide a creation full of injustice, unrighteousness, and unholiness. So, something had to be done, and that something was the cross; and we will be thinking more about different aspects of the cross in this series. Always, though, with an eye toward...you know, not just sort of academic questions, but how does this affect your heart and my heart and all of our hearts today? And particularly in this episode now, there is a cursed nature to the cross, and we are going to see that in this program from scripture. There is a curse, but why is it so bad?

DARRELL DELANEY

So, a lot of people may not think about that the cross itself is a curse; and when people hear *curse*, some people think of witches and Harry Potter, or they think of, you know, people casting hexes or spells on people. Some people think of bad words. When I was a kid, I was told not to curse...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, don't curse.

DARRELL DELANEY

Don't cuss; don't curse; don't say bad words; but this is not what we are referring to when we say *curse*. We actually are talking about the implications that come from not obeying the Lord; and we see that in the Old Testament, that the Bible is replete with God's requirements, and what he asks us to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, in the book of Deuteronomy, the final book of the first five books of the Bible...the Pentateuch; Deuteronomy, as we have thought about before on *Groundwork*, is a long sermon from Moses, in which he is reteaching the new generation, who have wandered for forty years. They are going to go into the Promised Land, and so he is setting the agenda for the Promised Land. So, very near the end of the book, Deuteronomy

28: If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. ²All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God.

It goes on to list some: You will be blessed in the city and you will be blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed...so forth and so on; but Darrell, there is a flip side, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right; I love how it is conditional; and so, you've got the if you do this then God will do that; and so, if you obey, you get those things; but then it says further on: ¹⁵However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you: (He goes on to say:) ¹⁶You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. ¹⁷Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. ¹⁸The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. ¹⁹You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out.

He also goes on to say that foreign countries will come in and take you away as captives. We saw that in Israel's history...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it will happen.

DARRELL DELANEY

We realize that as far as the Old Testament goes, if you obey God you are blessed, if you disobey God you are cursed; and it is not because he curses you, it is because you fail to do what he said, and you have incurred upon yourself the natural consequences of the curse. So, it is actually a natural consequence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we first started hearing about curses in Genesis 3; and we looked at part of that in the previous program, the first part of this series, where the serpent is cursed; but Adam and Eve get cursed, too; and what a curse is, it is things just aren't going to go right. It is interesting, Darrell, you know, if you look at the book of Psalms, already in Psalm 1 you've got this worldview that says the world is divided into two camps, and it is just this black and white for the psalmist: There is the righteous and the wicked...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here in Deuteronomy, it is sort of the same thing: Look, there are the blessed and the cursed; and if you are cursed, it is because you are living on the wrong side of history. You are opposing the Creator God, who made the world; and who knows better how the world is supposed to work than the God who designed it; I mean, right? If I build something and give it to my kids, I am the one who tells them how to work it, because I built it. I know best, right? So, if you don't obey God, you are going to be cursed because you are on the wrong side of history, and you are on the wrong end of the operation. Things aren't going to work.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Adam and Eve found this out the hard way, because they started on the right side of history. God gave them one law: don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just one...

DARRELL DELANEY

And you had one job, and you messed that up because you disobeyed him. So, now they cross over, and because of that it is genetic now. It is like in our sin nature. It is in everyone. It is in the cosmos. It is in the creation. The curse had implications; now, it is everywhere. To this day, we have those issues bothering us because the Children of Israel...of course, they broke their covenant with God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And they got exiled. No wonder. The natural consequences that came with the curse, that is part of the issue of why they ended up in exile in the first place.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; in all of life, and we see this reflected in scripture, too, Darrell, there are sort of good momentum and bad momentum, you know; and sometimes one good deed leads to another and people pay it forward, you know, all this good stuff...random acts of kindness...there can be good; but there is also bad momentum, where one bad choice leads to another bad choice. You do something wrong. You are embarrassed about it. Then you lie about it, and you lie about it again, and then the cover-up becomes worse than the crime; and things just start going down the tubes, as we say, because all of a sudden, life unravels; and it feels like you are cursed; and the Bible says: Well, you kind of are, because if you don't follow God's operating instructions, the thing isn't going to work. If it blows up in your face, it is because you didn't follow the directions; and that is what the law is. It is the directions...operating...the owner's manual for creation.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, failing to follow that law that God set out...not only did it have physical and spiritual implications, it had implications on the whole world; and we are still in that problem now. That implication ultimately leads to death and separation from God; and that is the bad news. We are not able to enjoy the love, the grace, the mercy, the peace, and the fellowship with God and one another that he designed, because that was the benefit of following the law; but since we failed that, we are in a situation. We have a big, big problem; and in the next segment, we want to talk about how God does address that. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we have been talking about the curse of the cross, and why the curse is so bad and what the implications have been. We found out that this is a divine problem that started with us people—with Adam disobeying, with the Children of Israel disobeying—and you talked about how it snowballed in the wrong direction. I mean, sometimes we get momentum going in a positive direction, but we see in the history of the books of scripture that it hasn't been going that way, and God has to intervene.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there is this principle in scripture, Darrell, of sort of like cures like, right? Something of the nature of the problem needs to be involved in the nature of the solution to the problem, right? Famously, we saw this in the book of Numbers, where the serpents were sent as a punishment to Israel. They were biting people; the people cry out so God tells Moses: Okay, make a bronze snake, put it up on a pole, and when the people look at the snake, the snakes on the ground won't bother them anymore. So, what is the cure for snakebite? Look at a snake. And Jesus will bring that up to Nicodemus. He said: You know what? I am going to be like that serpent in the desert; so, when you look on me when I die, you are going to get life. Well, okay; so, one of the consequences of sin is the curse. So, the solution is going to have to involve a curse, too; and the Bible

says that the way Jesus died fits that particular bill.

DARRELL DELANEY

Actually, this is picked up in Deuteronomy 21, where Moses is in the midst of giving them various laws, and it is interesting how they deal with certain sins of the law. In verses 22 and 23: If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, ²³you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse...or a tree in some translations...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

A cross in some translations. We know our Lord Jesus was definitely hung on a cross for our sins; and he became the curse right then.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it has not ever been abundantly clear to me, Darrell, exactly why being hung on a tree or on a pole is cursed, but it is. God says it, so you know, I believe it; that settles it. But perhaps it ties in with human dignity. Perhaps it ties in with how much God values these beautiful human bodies that he made, that even somebody who gets executed deserves some dignity. The body deserves to be buried. You don't just leave it out there to decay or have birds peck at it or whatever, because there is something about that kind of death...and again, the Bible doesn't really tell us why God regards it this way, but God says that is a cursed way to die, so don't leave them there because that is just so ugly, that is so bad that it is almost as though all of the bad consequences of sin—the curse—you can see it when somebody dies that way. That is a cursed way to die.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that exactly leads right into the salvation story. We inherited the curse, if you will, because Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord when he gave the command in the garden; but also, the Children of Israel made vows to God...they promised...there was blood sprinkled on them, and all this other stuff, and they said: Yes, we will keep these laws when we go into the Promised Land. They did not keep them, but they were warned before they went in: Hey, you are going to be blessed if you obey this; you are going to be cursed if you disobey this. So, they brought the curse upon themselves; and by nature of inheritance, we also have inherited that same curse; and that is why God had to intervene to deal with that curse. If the curse isn't transferred, we will never have fellowship with God...we will never be able to have fellowship with one another.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You wish you could do this, almost. I mean, most of us cannot anymore, but suppose you start reading the Bible in Genesis and you just kept reading right on through. It might take you a while, right? By the time you get to Deuteronomy 21, and by the time you get to verse 23 of Deuteronomy 21...what you just read...anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse...and then you are going to move on now to verse 24...you keep going...well, eventually you are going to forget about that verse. It doesn't look all that important. It doesn't jump out at you when reading Deuteronomy, you say: Wow; boy, that hung on a tree thing...cursed...that is, nah. You would read it and move on. There are tons of stuff like that in the Bible; and then, you get to Galatians Chapter 3, and the Apostle Paul, and look what he says. This is Galatians 3:10: For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, [as it is written]: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ¹¹Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith." (And then he goes on in verse 13) Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: (and here it is) "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole." ¹⁴He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

So, now Paul picks up on that little verse in Deuteronomy 21 and makes a really big deal out of it.

DARRELL DELANEY

I love how scripture interprets scripture. It really helps us understand in its purest form what is meant by this. I think a couple things are going on. The first thing is like, if you are trying to keep up by your own righteousness, or you are trying to draw your own straight lines, good luck with that, because no one has ever been able to do that perfectly; and the law would be certainly oppressive if we had to continue to keep six hundred laws...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

How you keep that...it just becomes an oppressive, tyrannical thing if you try to keep every single one of those. It is not possible; and so, because Christ intervened, we no longer have to do that. We received that by faith. It is a beautiful thing for us to receive by faith, and I believe that we will understand because he became the curse that has been transferred, and now pardon can be what we receive by faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and so, indeed, Paul is talking a lot about the law there in Galatians 3; and as you just said, Darrell, there are a lot of laws. When you were talking just now, Darrell, it reminded me of the rich young ruler, you know, in the New Testament, who comes to Jesus: What must I do...*I do*...right...to inherit eternal life? Jesus says: What about the law? The Ten Commandments? Got it; cased it; got it done. I did all that...

DARRELL DELANEY

Since I was little...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, since I was a kid. Anything else? How about sell all your possessions and give to the poor? One thing I cannot do right, and he walks away sad because, if you think it is on you, you are always going to get sad at some point because you are going to hit a wall.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Something you just cannot do or you didn't do quite right. It's got to come by faith, and it's got to come because somebody has got to pull us out of this curse. There used to be a TV show called *Truth or Consequences*. If you didn't give the right answer, there were consequences, right? Well, truth and consequences...if you don't follow God's law there are consequences, and the consequence is being cursed. Who is going to get us out of that? Only the one who became the curse for us.

DARRELL DELANEY

The only way that we are going to get out of it, Scott, is if that curse is transferred, and that is exactly what happens with Christ. He becomes the curse, and then we have our curse taken away and put on him. Just like Isaiah 53 says: ⁵The chastisement of our peace has been laid on him. And to quote the famous hymn, *It is Well with My Soul*, it says: My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more; praise the Lord...O my soul.

That is good news, because Christ becomes the curse for us, and that is why we bear it no more. So, when we wrap up this program, we are going to talk about how we should live in light of all this great news. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second part of a seven-part series on the cross of Jesus Christ, as part of our Lenten reflections: Why did Jesus die, and what are some of the components to that particular kind of death that Jesus died on Golgotha that are instructive for us and that are good news for us, right, not just idle curiosity, here. The gospel is in here. Today, Darrell, we have been talking about the curse, and we just said...we quoted that passage from Paul in Galatians 3: Christ became the curse for us.

DARRELL DELANEY

That means I get to live a life of gratitude. That is the first thing we should do, thank God for this; thank God that he took our punishment; thank God that he is the one who becomes the curse instead of us. There is no way we could endure God's wrath. I mean, we couldn't...we cannot even endure our own self-condemnation and guilt and punishment, let alone divine punishment; and so, that punishment was passed to Christ; and we get to enjoy the peace and forgiveness that comes through his work that he finished.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Some time ago on *Groundwork*, we did a series on 2 Corinthians. There is this very arresting, striking verse in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul writes: God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

So, there is a trade going on...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But I have always found it so interesting, Darrell. Paul doesn't say God kind of pretended like Jesus was a sinner, you know, so that he could put our sins on him. He didn't even say: Well, he kind of took your place. Paul says he had no sin, but he *became* sin...God made him to *be* sin. That is an amazingly powerful line. It is as though Jesus incarnated, not just human flesh, but he ended up incarnating sin itself. He took it all into him so that he *was* sin for us. Not really; he didn't commit any sins, but he *was* sin; and that is why we can now be righteous. That is amazing.

DARRELL DELANEY

That divine substitution that you are talking about, Scott, is the thing that makes the gospel so beautiful. In an episode that is coming up, we are going to talk about the paradox of that, and why that is interesting, but I feel like right here, we need to just relieve people from trying to create their own righteousness by what their achievements are. I don't care what bootstraps you think you have, pulling yourself up by them is never going to help you in the eyes of God. You cannot save yourself with your degrees or your money—your bank account—or how many status symbols you think you have...material possessions...you are dating this person; you are married to that person. None of those things will ever set you free, but we have grace and mercy and forgiveness from a God who is rich in mercy, and we get to not only enjoy that, but we get to share that good news with other people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Again, that substitutionary atonement that you just referred to, Darrell; we really get it from Isaiah 53...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Verse 4, familiar words to many of us, particularly in the Lenten season: Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. ⁵But he was pierced for

our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Our former *Groundwork* co-host, Dave Bast, used to point out that sometimes people treat Isaiah like it is the fifth gospel. There is so much gospel in Isaiah that it is like the fifth gospel, but what I like about those verses we just read, the suffering servant that Isaiah is talking about, pointing to Jesus...he is going to be full of pain and suffering...and then it says: And we regarded him as stricken by God...afflicted by God. So, in other words, we are tempted to look at Jesus and say: What did he do? Wow, he's getting nailed. He must have really messed up. Isaiah says: No, no, no, no, no. God is not doing that to him, you are. That is *your* sin, that is *my* sin, that is *our* sin...not God...it is us doing it to him. *I* crucified him, as the old hymn puts it.

DARRELL DELANEY

Our hearts are fickle; and like we said in another episode, our lines are crooked, even though we try to live as straight as we can. We realize we cannot do it; and God knew we couldn't do it, so he intervened in the situation. He saved us from ourselves...from our own implications of our sins; and I tell you this, Scott, if I was drowning in the ocean and somebody literally brought me out of the ocean, I am not swimming around, trying to make it, I actually, literally drown and pass out; they come get me, bring me to shore, resuscitate me and I cough and come back to life, there is not a person on earth that I am not going to tell about it. I don't care if you don't want to hear it; I don't care if it offends you, but I am going to let you know this person saved my life. Now, if that is the implication for my natural life, how much more should I be excited about a Jesus and a God who saved my *eternal* life. I should be able to tell that to everyone and not be ashamed, because he saved us. I deserved that death. I don't get that death because he loves us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, knowing that we live under the curse of living on the wrong side of history, because we have disobeyed God and we mess up life and we don't follow the owner's manual for creation God gave us, and so stuff blows up in our faces. That is not good news; but what you just said, Darrell, is beautiful news. He became the curse...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He became sin so that we are out of it now. We are in blessing. We are in righteousness. We have life. Our gratitude and our enthusiasm to tell people about our gratitude tends to swell with how big the gift is. You loan me five bucks for a hamburger, thanks. You give me one of your kidneys, whoa, I am never going to forget that. So, right; you are drowning in the ocean and you get your life back, you are going to be eternally grateful to that person. We have gotten our life back through Jesus, and that makes, indeed, truly eternal... We sometimes say: I will be eternally grateful to you, Darrell. That is exaggeration, maybe; but with God, we really are eternally grateful...no exaggeration.

DARRELL DELANEY

Definitely debtors to him. If I am in a situation where I may feel like I am struggling, trying to find my life's significance, trying to find my importance, my identity, my purpose; or if I am just discouraged, I need to know: None of those things that I can do will ever put me in right standing with God. They will never put me in right standing with God...that is the bad news. The curse is still on me if I try to make my own righteousness; but here is the good news: God has addressed that situation by making his Son the curse; therefore, I can receive by faith this right-standing with God that will be given to me because that has actually been atoned for and been paid for.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Been paid for. We opened talking about the hymn *Joy to the World*; in that hymn, you know, we repeat those last lines multiple times: Far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found, God has saved us. You know, as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed the curse from us, thanks be to

God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney and Scott Hoezee. Join us again next time as we study scriptures that help us to understand the shame of the cross.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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Printed on July 16, 2025