
Biblical Guidance for Your Life Questions

DAVE BAST

We are always glad to hear from you, and appreciate when you share which topics or passages you would like to hear discussed on Groundwork. Today we will dig into scripture together to discover a biblical way to respond when we encounter popular yet mistaken messages of the prosperity gospel. We will also explore what the Bible has to say about our attitudes as we grow older; and we will study scripture to find out if it has anything to say about funeral customs. We will also discuss how our customs can witness to the Gospel and our beliefs about the resurrection of the body and life after death. So 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 this is another listener question program. We do that a couple of times a year. Most of the feedback we get is verbal, if we run into people in different parts of the country who are listeners, which is great; thank you; but we also hear from people on Facebook, other social media, e-mail, text message, and occasionally even an old-fashioned letter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are going to address three questions. We are going to start with one from Oscar, who wants to know about the origin...what is the origin of the prosperity gospel? This is also sometimes called the health and wealth gospel; and just so we are clear at the outset, what we are talking about here is the message that some claim is the gospel that by virtue of being a believer, God is going to bless you materially. You are going to get more money, your business will flourish, everything in your life is going to be materially better because that is what the Bible promises, and that is what prosperity preachers present.

DAVE BAST

Right; and you know, we could start out by acknowledging that there are some rather staggering promises made in scripture. Jesus said: Ask whatever you will and you will receive it. You know, pray for anything you want and you will get it. The Psalmist often talked about the blessings that God would shower upon the righteous, or on His people. No good thing will He withhold from those who lead a godly life. Sometimes people point to examples of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, all of whom were wealthy individuals in terms of their society; or David or Solomon with all of their gold and silver; you know, the riches of Solomon. Yes, okay; but nevertheless, that illustrates, too, the danger of proof texting, which is to wrench a statement or an example out of its context in the Bible and just hold that up and say: See, it says this; so therefore it has to be true.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; if you take it out of context and isolate it you could, and prosperity preachers do, build a whole theology; taken in the wider context of scripture, we know most of those promises are meant spiritually, often for now; but ultimate fulfillment perhaps in the kingdom of God or in the new creation. But we also have to balance that with Jesus making clear again and again in the New Testament that usually riches stand in the way of salvation. They are not the goal; in fact, you are supposed to give away what you have. Jesus tells the

disciples: You can anticipate having *less* in this world on account of following Me, not more. Recently on Groundwork we did a whole series on the letter of James, and James is again and again warning people: Don't show favoritism to the rich. That is in James 2. In James 4, he talks about the quarrels you have among you is because you don't have something that you want, which would be something material, and that leads to quarreling among you. So, the New Testament, and Jesus Himself, more than counterbalance the blank check looking promises.

DAVE BAST

Yes; or I think of a statement that Jesus Himself made; one of the most poignant things He said. It is in Luke 9:58; Matthew also records it: Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. He said that incidentally in addressing several would-be followers.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He is trying to give them a realistic picture of what following Him is like. So, you want to tell me that every follower of Jesus is entitled to wealth and fame and whatever else he wants, when Jesus Himself was crucified, and owned nothing at the end except a seamless robe that they gambled over? Come on! Give me a break.

What is especially offensive about the prosperity gospel is that those who most loudly proclaim it tend to enrich themselves at the hands of their flock.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that part of it... So, Oscar asked about the origin of the prosperity gospel. It has spread around the world now, and a lot of Christians in Africa are now struggling with this as well in other parts of the world. It did kind of grow out of...I mean, one of the things that was true of America all along is kind of this "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps," capitalist ethos; get ahead, be an entrepreneur, pursue life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And so, even in the 19th Century and early 20th Century a lot of these revival preachers on the sawdust trail who would go from town to town and hold these revival meetings discovered that one way to get people to contribute more money to *them* was to promise them something in return, and it wasn't usually just the grace of God; it was usually something material; and by the time TV preachers – and radio preachers first – but then TV preachers came on, they also had very expensive TV shows to run. They needed lots of money; and so, one of the ways to motivate people to donate and call the 800 number on your screen and make a donation to this ministry is to say: And if you do, God will heal your diseases and He will make your business a success. God will reward you if you bless us with a contribution today. So, you get all this money and greed and sort of the capitalist ethos of the United States in particular, and it kind of makes this toxic brew that all God is after, as one current prosperity preacher puts it: God wants your best life now. That is all that God is. He is doling out these material blessings; and it obscures the Gospel; and right, as you said, Dave, the very poor, simple, humble savior at the heart of the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is especially unseemly when prosperity preachers live lavish lifestyles themselves. They live in huge mansions and they drive incredibly expensive cars. Some of them even buy private jets for when they go around the country or the world preaching their message...

SCOTT HOEZEE

I heard one recently who defended how he *needed* three private jets to do his ministry.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and you know, we also ought to acknowledge that the vast majority of the congregations of these prosperity preachers are poor people. You know, one of the rationalizations they use is: Well, my people want me to look good because it reflects well on them. In fact, we have good friends in the Church of

Uganda, and they like to say that a diocese is ashamed if it doesn't have a fat bishop because it implies they are not giving enough; but you know, rationalizations aside, I much prefer a statement that Pope Paul VI made years ago when he said that those who live by alms cannot afford luxuries. It is not appropriate for servants of Christ, whose living is provided by the gifts of God's people, to spend those on themselves in a lavish or extravagant way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We recently did a series on II Corinthians, and there Paul often talks about giving donations, but it is always for the poor; and Paul always makes it clear: I am not asking you to give to me; this isn't about me; this is to help the poor in Macedonia; this is to help the poor people; that is what the Church is about; it is taking care of the poor, which is why they had deacons as one of the first offices they established after the apostles, because somebody has to take care of the poor. Jesus made it abundantly clear, we are to take care of the poor, and not enrich ourselves.

DAVE BAST

Well, and Paul himself is a great example. Here is another biblical model, if you want a biblical model, against the prosperity gospel. He worked with his hands. He supported himself with a humble trade so as not to take money from the Church to support his own life.

Enough of that, maybe. That is kind of a slam-dunk if you want us to critique the prosperity gospel, but next we will discuss a couple of questions that you have asked about spiritual attitudes, especially as we approach old age; and then questions about death and funeral customs.

Segment 2

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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is a listener question program; and so we will get right to a question from Rita, who says: How can we talk about, or what should we think about in terms of the attitudes we should develop as we enter our senior years?

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, let me talk about that first since I am already entered on my senior years. I think the first thing we want to say is how consistently the Bible honors those who are old. Let's not use euphemisms about senior years or seniors or all that. I mean, we are talking about old people – old men and old women; and the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament, comes out of a traditional culture, and like traditional cultures still today in the world, age is venerated. The aged are looked up to. It is a wonderful word that our modern American and Western culture, which is youth obsessed – youth crazed, almost – needs to hear. So, here is a wonderful verse from Proverbs 20:29; in fact, my wife quoted this to me the other day:

The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of old men is their gray hair (and old women, too, I might add); but gray hair...it is a sign of honor; it is a sign of splendor.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, as you said, in the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, and you see this sometimes in the Prophets: To die young was considered a great tragedy, but to become old and full of years was considered a great blessing; and the old were to be models for the young. In fact, here is another scripture passage from Titus – Paul's letter to Titus as he served on the island of Crete; and so Paul writes in Chapter 2:

¹You must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine. ²Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self controlled and sound in faith, love, and endurance. ³Likewise teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. ⁴Then they can urge younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self controlled and pure, to be kind...and so forth and so on. So, what you get is this idea that the old have acquired wisdom and experience, and they have to share that. They have to mentor; that is not a biblical word, but it is a word we use today; they need to be mentors to the young, who, as you said, then need to receive it, right? We dismiss the old too much today. You know, we want to be forever young; or as the one store in the mall that I see when I go walking in the mall: Forever 21; well, nobody is forever 21.

DAVE BAST

Or should want to be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right; but anyway, so, the old shouldn't be seen as out of touch or old fashioned. They should be looked to as sources of wisdom by the young; and then, for the old, too, what that also means is they have to be open to the young, right? Not to be arrogant or dismissive, or: Well, that was never a problem when I was a kid, so...

DAVE BAST

Yes, this younger generation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That doesn't help either, right? To be old and full of years in the best biblical sense, and to do what Paul was telling Titus to recommend to the members of his church means an increase in Christ-likeness, which will mean an increase in humility – a willingness to listen to the young, and to understand their problems, and not just throw up your hands and say: Ah, I just don't understand the younger generation. They shouldn't even be worried about that stuff. We weren't when we were that age. Well, they are worried about it today; so, you know, the old also need to learn not just what to say but how to listen.

DAVE BAST

Getting back to the exact question: The spiritual attitudes we ought to be developing when we are entering our senior years. So, we are called to be mentors, we are called to be examples; but here is another great point that Paul makes, and he uses himself as an example of this. In Philippians 3, beginning at verse 12:

Not that I have already attained all of this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it; but one thing I do...He is writing at the end of his life here, and he is saying: I haven't got it yet; I haven't quite arrived; I am not a complete Christian; I am not...but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

I love that; you know, Paul is...unlike so many old people, he is not dwelling in the past; he is not just living on memories; he is saying: You know, I am turning away from the past. I want to die climbing. It is a great phrase: that forward look; that eternal goal setting of continuing to move closer to Christ – to move up toward heaven where Christ is seated at the right hand of God – that is the attitude that ought to mark all of us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and maybe just before we close this segment, maybe mention one other thing...another thing...and all of us who are pastors and who work in the church know this...another thing that can happen to our senior members – our older members – is they are mindful that they are a lot closer to death than they used to be, and that can lead to some fear; and sometimes even stalwart, wonderful Christian people will express doubts: Am I really saved? Have I been good enough? And we shouldn't dismiss those fears and say: Well, of course; what a wonderful person you've been. Put that out of your head. No, these are genuine fears and

doubts that come to people, and we need to listen carefully as pastors, as family members, as friends, and take these dear saints back to the basics of the Gospel and the assurance of salvation by grace alone. We don't live by fear; we are not going to be judged solely through our works, but we will be seen as Christ and Christ will be with us...

DAVE BAST

Whatever we may have done or failed to do, right. Here is a wonderful prayer that I want to close this segment with. It is from John Henry Newman, the great 19th Century preacher, first Anglican and then Catholic...

SCOTT HOEZEE

John Henry Cardinal Newman.

DAVE BAST

Yes. May He support us all the day long till the shades lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then in His mercy may He give us safe lodging and a holy rest and peace at the last. So, that is our prayer for everyone, but especially for seniors.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is a beautiful prayer: A holy rest at the last, which does actually lead us to our final question for this program from a listener named Glen, who wonders about burial customs. When the end does come, burial, cremation, does the Bible say anything about that? We will ponder that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, one of our listener question programs, and our final question for this program comes from a listener named Glen, who writes: I am wondering about the difference in burial and what the Bible really says. And we are assuming that what he means is burial versus cremation. So we will talk a little bit about that and about burial customs – funeral customs for Christians; although the Bible doesn't actually really say anything about this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; in biblical times, and certainly for people in the Middle East, and for the Israelites, therefore, burial was the standard way to treat the body. One of the earliest examples of that is in Genesis, I think, 23 or 24, when Sarah dies, and Abraham actually had...because he had left his home, he really didn't own any of Canaan yet; and so Abraham has to parley and make a bargain with some landowners to get just enough ground to bury the love of his life, Sarah. That is one of the earliest biblical examples. Cremation was pretty much unknown in biblical times.

DAVE BAST

Right; there is actually kind of irony in that Abraham story because it is the only piece of the Promised Land he ever owned...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He ever owned, yes.

DAVE BAST

That was promised to him; but so, we have to use our judgment on this question; and what we really, I think, could talk about is the Christian attitude toward death and the resurrection of the body. That is the significant thing. And the early Christians consistently gave evidence or gave testimony to their belief in the importance of the body and the future that the body had; so the classic passage is I Corinthians 15; the whole chapter is about the resurrection, but Paul ends with that mighty vision of what will happen in a moment – in the

twinkling of an eye – at the last trumpet. The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. I cannot hear those words without thinking of the Hallelujah Chorus from the Messiah...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes.

DAVE BAST

But because of that, unlike the pagans who surrounded them, who usually just cremated bodies...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, just got rid of them.

DAVE BAST

Christians believe that bodies should be buried as a testimony to the future that they have.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or, if we do opt for cremation, which we can today, the ashes themselves are treated respectfully because that is the remnant of the body. Most of the bodies of people who have died in history have long since gone to ash or dust, right? I mean, eventually everything goes away. God doesn't need a physical, well-preserved body in a casket in a steel vault in order to raise you again at the last day. God will raise up millions of people whose bodies have been dust for centuries and millennia now; and that is true of the ashes of a cremated person, too; but the idea is, one of the earliest heresies of the Church was *Gnosticism*; Paul was combating it already in the First Century in Corinth and in Colossae, and in a few other contexts; and what Gnosticism said was, the body is just a shell. Physical matter doesn't matter. We want to escape from our bodies at death and never, ever return to them, just so we can be wisps and vapors and Casper the friendly ghost for all eternity because the physical is gross and has no future. Christianity and Jesus Himself say: No, that is not true. This is part of God's good creation. We are designed to be a body/soul unity, and when death rips the soul away, that is a tragedy, but we honor creation and we honor God's goodness in creation by honoring also the body; and so, if we bury it, we go to the place of the burial; if we burn it, we go to the place of the fire as a testimony to our belief in the inherent goodness of creation and in the future of our bodies.

DAVE BAST

Yes; in my opinion, the question we ought to be asking ourselves as Christians is not burial versus cremation, but funeral versus no funeral...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because in our increasingly secular culture, where more and more people have no hope for the future, where more and more people end life and just say: I don't want a service. I don't want anything. Or if they have anything, it is a little party with drinks afterwards, and the body is sort of...let the professionals get rid of that somehow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And indeed, one of the professionals in this country is a man named Thomas Lynch, who lives in Milford, Michigan. He is a wonderful author and writer. He wrote a book some years ago called *The Undertaking*, talking about his life as an undertaker, because he is in the funeral home business. He wrote a book with Tom Long recently called *The Good Funeral*, and Lynch says that he has noticed this as a funeral home director, that more and more, people just want the body disappeared; and you have celebration of life services with good cheese and merlot, but no body; and he says that is like a baptism without a baby; a wedding without a bride; a funeral without a corpse; that is just not right and it is not theologically right to want the body disappeared, downsized, and removed from sight. We honor the dead by going to the place of the burial,

going to the place of the cremation, and affirming the goodness of God and the tragedy of death, but the hope of the resurrection.

DAVE BAST

And that is really what a Christian funeral is supposed to be about. It is great to remember, it is great to celebrate a life, it is great to honor and share reminiscences or family sharing...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Or eulogies; that is all well and good; it has a place; but the funeral needs to be about the Gospel; it needs to be a testimony to our belief, as we say it in the Apostles' Creed if we still recite that, as we ought to: I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. I used to, when I was a pastor...and we still went to the cemetery. That is another thing that has fallen into disuse, you know; it is not convenient. But we would go to the graveside every time for the funeral as the body is lowered into the earth; and I would invite people to stand around that open grave and say the Apostles' Creed: I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting; and that is what we can do. We can make our funerals at least, or the funerals of those closest to us, into proclamations of the Gospel in a culture that increasingly has lost it or forgotten it or maybe never heard it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the hardest parts of a funeral is to stand at that open grave, which is maybe why we avoid it. It is the most emotionally wrenching moment; but it is, as you just said, Dave... If you can still say the Creed there, then you indeed have given great witness to your Christian hope.

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and as we have demonstrated on this program, we want to help you dig deeper into scripture. So we want to hear your questions. You can go to groundworkonline.com and find a way to send your questions to us, and we will take up those topics and passages on future Groundwork programs.

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