
By Scripture Alone

SCOTT HOEZEE

Years ago, my parents were visiting my grandmother when they noticed a picture of me, the grandson who is a preacher, on a bookshelf; but the picture was set on top of a Bible. My parents noticed this, and Grandma said, “Yes, that is right. He stands foursquare on God’s Word alone, and that is the way it will always be.” Well, Grandma’s idea was certainly right, and it has deep roots in Church history, and particularly in what became known as the Protestant Reformation in the Church. We are saved by faith alone and by grace alone, through what we can learn from God’s Word alone; but why do we believe that? What implications does it have for the Church also yet today? We will explore that today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

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

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is our second program in a five-part series, which we are recording around the time of the five-hundredth anniversary of the reformation of the Church, which began on October 31, 1517, and we are looking at some of the five key aspects of the Reformation, which are summarized in all of these *solae* in the Latin, or *alone* statements. So, in the previous program we looked at how we are saved by faith alone; this time we are going to look at how it is through scripture alone; and still coming up is grace alone, Christ alone, and then all things to God’s glory alone.

DAVE BAST

Right; and as we noted in our prior program, by faith alone—justification by faith alone—is kind of the core principle of the Reformation that points to how we are saved. As we will see in a future program, we are saved because of God’s grace or by God’s grace, but we access that grace through faith alone, not through faith plus good works, not through faith plus appealing to the saints, not through faith plus looking at Church relics and venerating them; and incidentally, that is why Luther chose October 31st as the day for nailing his theses to the door because the next day was All Saints Day, and the castle was going to be open to the public so they could come in and worship the bones and bits and bobs that the prince there had gathered from the saints through the ages; and most people thought that was the quick way to heaven, was to get the saints on your side. So, no, Luther said, it is by faith alone, and that is what scripture teaches, because it is the question of where do we get our authority?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and faith by grace is generated through the words of scripture, either read or proclaimed in sermons. So, we are focusing today on that Bible, on scripture alone, and I think we just need a couple reminders for historical context of what was true in Luther’s day, and what had been true up until Luther’s time, in the Sixteenth Century. Of course, for fifteen hundred years, up until the time of Luther, the Church had seen the Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures—what we call the Old Testament—and the New Testament, as the foundation. In fact, one of the earliest things the Church did in the early centuries was to come together and try to figure out which of the books are canonical; which do we believe are really God-breathed, inspired? And through a prayer-soaked, Holy Spirit drenched process, they decided on sixty-six books: Thirty-nine in the Old Testament, twenty-seven in the New Testament. So, the Bible had always been the foundation, but of course,

another thing we need to remember is that until the Fifteenth Century, almost no ordinary Christian had access to a Bible.

DAVE BAST

Right; books were extremely rare and extremely expensive because they all had to be copied by hand...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Furthermore, the Bible had not really been translated. There are a few beginning efforts in the thirteen hundreds in England. We think of the name John Wycliffe...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Who became noteworthy, and actually was later condemned by the Catholic Church; but really, until the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1460's, few people had access to any books, outside of a monastery or maybe a church library.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And even there they would...as you just said, Dave, they would likely be in Latin or in the original Hebrew and Greek, but not a language anybody could read, if they could read at all.

DAVE BAST

But after printing came in, printing of the Bible took off; and we should also note, just for historical purposes, that the Bible was the first book to be printed. In fact, the word *bible*—*biblos* in Greek—means book...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Book, right.

DAVE BAST

So, it was *the* book, and the very first thing to be printed; and then people began to translate it, and that effort really worked hand-in-glove with efforts at reforming the theology of the Church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; because the other thing that happened over time was that, as the Church built up more decisions and pronouncements and edicts and papal bulls, and statements from the Pope, sometimes the Church... I don't think anybody ever came right out and said: Oh, Church tradition and the Bible are the same; but at times it looked like Church tradition and what the Church was saying was eclipsing what the Bible was saying; and that is what Luther found when he read the Bible for himself. He was a monk in a monastery. He was being taught in the theology of his day that being saved involved a lot of penance from our side, maybe purchasing indulgences to shorten up time in purgatory; there was a lot of focus on human effort; and then Luther decided to read the Bible for himself, and he came across a passage like this from Romans 3:

²¹But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and it is attested by the Law and the Prophets; ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe, for there is no distinction; ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴but they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

DAVE BAST

Right; a key passage, certainly, in the understanding of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, or justification by faith. Faith is the way we gain access to Christ and all his benefits, as we said in our prior program; but here is the issue: You read a passage like that and it kind of hit people like Luther as a bombshell, and they said: We need to let the Bible loose among ordinary people so they can read this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because this is not what we have been hearing from the priests.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have been hearing a different message. This sounds like *really* good news...really, the free gift of God, as it says in that Romans 3 passage we just read. So, there was this disconnect; and so one of the first things Luther did after he got this Reformation rolling, which kind of took off like wildfire beyond anything he expected, was he translated the Bible into German so that the common people who could read could read it in the language of their own mother tongue.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That, as you said, Dave, had hardly ever been done before.

DAVE BAST

Well, not only had it not been done, it was expressly forbidden; and in fact, in one of the most notorious incidents, Sir Thomas More, who was later executed by Henry VIII, and was eventually declared a saint of the Catholic Church, himself was a persecutor when he had political power—earlier, before the Reformation. He actually sent agents to hunt down and betray William Tyndale, the first translator of the English Bible, who was burned at the stake for that “crime.” So, here is the deal, and I think we can maybe understand why this was so controversial; on the Catholic side they were saying: Look, if you put the Bible in everybody’s hands, they are going to believe all kinds of crazy things...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And we are going to end up with thousands and thousands of churches and sects, which in fact is what happened after the Reformation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is true.

DAVE BAST

So, they had a point; and they were saying: No, the Church needs to kind of ride the horse and interpret the Bible, and we need to look only one place for one interpretation; and the Reformers on the other hand said: No, let’s trust people; let’s trust the Holy Spirit...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the priesthood of *all* believers.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; give the Bible into everyone's hands; and yes, there is going to be some crazy things that happen, and we don't like that; but overall it is worth it so that people can hear the Word of God in their own language and believe it and get its message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so that is what happened; and of course, the Bible itself also, as people read it, makes claims for itself, and there are some key passages in scripture that help us to see and understand why this book is different from all other books and why it is so precious to us for that reason; and we will take that up next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are digging into the idea of scripture and scripture alone as the sole authority for the Christian faith and Christian life. As we like to say: It is our only rule of faith and practice; and now we want to turn to what the Bible actually claims about itself; not theological debates pro and con, not between Catholic or Protestant, but what does the Bible say about itself?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And a very famous passage in that regard is from II Timothy 3—Paul's letter to Timothy: ¹⁰Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹my persecutions and my suffering; the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra—what persecutions I endured; and yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹²Indeed, all who want to lead a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³but wicked people and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived; ¹⁴but as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it; ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known all the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

DAVE BAST

So there is a famous passage where Paul, referring primarily to the Old Testament...when he talks about the sacred writings and all scripture; at that point, the New Testament had not been gathered together...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. Paul was still writing it in this very letter, as it turned out.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly...which turned out... Scott, you mentioned earlier how the Church in its early centuries sort of gathered the books, the sixty-six books of what we call the canonical Bible together under the influence of the Spirit; and again, the kind of entered in to the argument because Catholics pointed to that and said: See, the Church chose the Bible; the Church is sort of above the Bible and is the authority; but the Reformers and other evangelicals replied: No, no, no; the Church recognized the Bible. It was the Bible that created the Church, not the other way around. It is the Word of God that really brings people to faith, and then goes on, as Paul says here, to train them and instruct them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; my teacher David Holwerda used to say that the early Church did not concoct canonicity, they confessed it; they confessed that they were led to believe that these were the sacred writings; including now the writings of Paul and Peter, and the four Gospels and the like; and these, Paul wrote to Timothy, these are useful, then as now. So Paul is saying...I mean, there are so many words out there, and we are drowning half the time from talking heads on TV and Twitter and Facebook and everything...lots of words, and that means there are going to be lots of loopy ideas; so we need to stay focused on the Bible. The same thing was true in

Timothy's day. Paul is saying: There are lots of people out there spouting all kinds of nonsense about God, religion... Don't listen to the deceivers; stay focused on the one true rule for faith and life, as we said, the scripture.

DAVE BAST

Right; here is another passage. This is from Hebrews 4:12: Indeed, the Word of God is living and active; sharper than any two-edged sword; piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

So, another image for the Word of God—for the Bible. It is like a sword; it cuts; it separates, or maybe we could say it is like a scalpel that can lay bare our sin and lead us to the truth, really.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is exactly what we need, what the readers of Hebrews needed way back when, and what we need today. Something has got to separate truth from fiction; something has got to separate orthodoxy from heresy—right ideas about God from wrong ideas about God, and that something is the sword of scripture that helps us to see clearly. There are lots of images, actually...

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, you just reminded me of another one, Scott, where scripture is called, or the Word of God is called the sword of the Spirit. We have read this analogy of a sword from Hebrews, but that gets again at the fundamental question of can we trust people with the Bible, despite the fact that sometimes people go in wrong directions as a result; but what we are really trusting is that the Spirit will use the Bible to lead us into truth; and so, one of the things that the Reformers also confessed was not just the authority of scripture, but the clarity of scripture—the sufficiency of scripture. Look, everything here you need to know for salvation is clearly taught. Maybe we don't agree on every last detail of how to organize our churches or political questions, but as far as salvation is concerned, it is all here plainly laid out. I mentioned William Tyndale, the first great English Bible translator, and when one of the bishops reproved him for saying, you know, this is going to cause trouble in the Church, he said: My goal is that every plowboy walking in the field will know more of scripture than you do, bishop.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; well, and that is what Paul says. That last verse that we just read from II Timothy 3, where Paul says: So that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient and equipped for every good work. He was not just saying just ministers, just the hierarchy of the Church...

DAVE BAST

Just the big shots...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we have these images in scripture, including the sword image, but there is also, even in the Old Testament, these wonderful words from Psalm 19:

⁷The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; ⁸the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; ⁹the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; and the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. ¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

So there is a very sweet and savory image for the Word of God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; a beautiful, beautiful thing; and you know what it all adds up to really, Scott, is a very simple, basic idea: There is a God, God is real, but he wants to be known, and he makes himself known. He reveals himself to us through his Word so we can...and that Word is perfect in every way, as the psalmist says; and therefore, it ought to be sweet to us; it ought to be something we desire.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and if it weren't for sin, we would know God. We would have a relationship with God, maybe like Adam and Eve did before the fall into sin; but sin has put up barriers. It has kind of blinded us, deafened us; we just cannot see God in creation; we do not hear the melodies of grace that play every day. So God has to crack through these sinful barriers, and he does that through his Word. He has to take the initiative now. We are not going to be able to get back to God on our own because of our sin, but God does. As you said, he wants to be loved, and he wants us to know of *his* love, and that is what he teaches us in scripture.

DAVE BAST

The Reformation, if it did nothing else, gave the Bible back to the Church, and it unleashed thereby the power of God's Word in the lives of individuals, and it turned the world upside down. It did all these things. It restored to us what must be our central authority; but what does this all mean today? That was five hundred years ago. What does it mean in *my* life? Does it make a difference how I live each day? What are some of the barriers, perhaps, or problems to allowing the Bible to have its role in me? Those are the things we want to talk about 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are finishing up the second of five programs, Dave, on central themes that emerged from the Protestant Reformation that started in 1517; and we have been focusing today on the Bible alone; and we want to think a little bit about scripture now in this last segment in terms of today. So, you said just a few minutes ago, Dave, that one of the great gifts of the Reformation was putting the Bible in the hands of the people; and indeed, we have that today. In fact, we have it so much that probably if we stopped somebody at church some Sunday...just do it with ten random people. Say: How many copies of the Bible are in your house? Most people probably would not know. They might say six or seven; no, wait, we might have about ten...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We don't even know how many copies we have; and unfortunately, that means we might also take this great gift for granted.

DAVE BAST

You know, one of the things, Scott, that it has been my privilege for a number of years as I worked with Words of Hope, was to travel, fairly extensively, in Africa and India; and again and again I was so struck by visiting with Christians who didn't really have a Bible in their language. They maybe had a portion of it. Maybe they just had a New Testament, but how precious the Bible was to those folks who did not have as much access to it as we do, and my goodness, we have so many... I mean, I have an online program of the Bible on my computer, and just the English versions alone must amount to...there must be thirty of them that you could choose from; but again, is it a closed book in many of our homes?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and you know, one of the things...we talked earlier in the program about what a revolution it was when Gutenberg invented the printing press, and made books available in a way they had never been available before in history. One of the things that happened, though, once people started to collect books is that they stopped doing what they had had to do up until then, which was memorize everything important. People used to have more scripture in their heads than they do now. We have scriptures in our bookcases, but do we have scripture in our heart and in our heads? Maybe one of the things we should encourage today is immersing ourselves more in the Bible—memorizing it more, so that we have access to it when maybe we are in a crisis or are alone or are afraid. Maybe we don't do enough of that now.

DAVE BAST

I know you are familiar with this, Scott. There is a famous dystopian novel by Ray Bradbury called *Fahrenheit 451*...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

About a terrible future civilization where books are burned; and there is a wonderful passage in there where he finally escapes and he meets the people left who have been memorizing books; and somebody says to him: Well, there is Matthew, there is Mark, there is Luke, and there is John. They have all memorized... Wouldn't it be great if somebody looked at us and said: Oh, there goes the book of Romans or there goes the Gospel of Mark.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and I think we need more of that; and a second thing that we could think about as we close out this program is very much related to that, and that is that you can talk to almost any preacher from any tradition—any denomination—this is a nondenominational, very ecumenical trend—but you will hear them talk about a rise in biblical illiteracy; that people just...even regular church goers...just do not know the Bible anymore. You cannot in a sermon just refer to Solomon and assume that people will know that was a king in Israel, the son of David, built the Temple. You cannot just make a passing reference to God's victory on Mount Carmel and expect people will know that was about Elijah and the false prophets of Baal. It is not going to register for them. Preachers have to explain everything now because we have let the Bible kind of become foreign to us.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, prior generations...earlier centuries knew their Bibles forwards and backwards, and today that can no longer be taken for granted; but again, it goes down to, in a sense, our interesting God. You know, do we want... He has spoken to us. He is there and he is not silent, I think Francis Schaeffer said years ago. God has given us this treasure, his Word, and we are free in most of our societies to access it...to read it...to gather and study it and discuss it together; to hear it proclaimed openly in churches. Do we take advantage of that?

There is a wonderful passage from the preface to John Wesley's collected sermons, where he says: I want to know one thing, the way to heaven. God has written it in a book. Oh, give me that book at all price; give me that book! And that ultimately is what it comes down to, isn't it, about the message of grace that scripture has for us?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that we should have a hunger to know it, to memorize it, as we said a moment ago, and to get familiar with the big story and the big movement so that it isn't the case that a preacher cannot even refer to Abraham and Sarah and most people don't know who it is...

DAVE BAST

Let alone how Jehu drives...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

One of the more obscure stories.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It shouldn't be the case that people who go to church know the plotlines and the characters in the Harry Potter books better than they know the Bible, but I am afraid that in some places people do know Harry Potter better than the Bible, and that is something that we should want to overcome because, last of all, Dave, I think we can note here...you know, in the previous part of this program we read Psalm 19, the Bible is more precious than gold, sweeter than honey from the honeycomb. We should, as individuals in our communities savor that we have this message, and savor that when you delve into the Bible you find out it is all grace; it is all a gift.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the key there is delve into it. You talked earlier, Scott, about memorizing. I have a friend who has given a big chunk of his life to memorizing huge sections of scripture, and they make for powerful telling, just to recite them; but for most of us, do we take the time...do we make it a priority? We say this. We say we believe the Bible is God's Word; well, to sit down with it each day, to open it in the morning; carve out time in our life for a quiet space where we can read this Word from God, savor it, take it in. As someone has said: You read the Bible like any other book because it is written by human beings. So, you look at the background and the circumstances and the time and the dates, and all that is going on; but at the same time, you read the Bible like *no* other book because it is the Word of God; and so, as you open it and read it, you are listening for his voice; you want him to speak to me personally. Someone said: I read the Bible as if it is a letter addressed from God to me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In II Peter, Peter writes: ^{1:19}We should be attentive to the Word because it is like a lamp shining in a dark place; the morning star that rises in your hearts. And that is a lovely message to consider how precious God's gift of scripture is: *Sola scriptura*, the Word alone...

DAVE BAST

A beautiful image, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God indeed. Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com and tell us what scripture passages you would like to hear on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/by-scripture-alone>

Printed on November 21, 2024