
Faith & Skepticism

DAVE BAST

It is easy for Christians today to project the image of being all put together, of having all the answers; but no one wants to be part of something that seems incomplete. We don't want to share a message with other people and then admit that there are areas of confusion and doubt in our own minds; and then many Christians don't voice their skepticism, and they stick to the issues that don't actually touch their lives – that are not really deep and controversial; but in this upcoming series, we are going to push some of the limits and engage in healthy discussion about the hard questions of our Christian faith.

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. You know, it is true today, Bob, that Christians are talking about issues, but they seem to only be focusing on a couple of the hot-button issues.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is a very selective group.

DAVE BAST

And it is kind of divided ideologically, right and left; you know, on the right it seems to be they are always hammering away about homosexuality and abortion, and on the left it is the war and global warming; but there are other things we should be talking about as well.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, those are important issues, but I think sometimes we just fixate on a few issues so that we can actually hold the implications of the Gospel away from our own lives.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, that is very true, isn't it? Global warming...what can I do about that? Well, I can recycle, but does it really affect my day-to-day life, especially my faith?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, we were talking about this in the office the other day, and people began to generate these ideas about topics that we really need to talk about and that get much closer to home.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and they might not be the things you would naturally, immediately think of, but we think they are true and right; and so this series of programs is going to focus on them. What else should we be talking about? That is what we are calling it; and it is going to be addressing ideas, topics, subjects that really do affect us in a direct way, and ought to make us better followers of Jesus Christ in the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, let's talk about one of those taboo subjects; and that really gets at the heart of the Gospel, thinking about who Jesus Christ really is – what we really think about Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, in a way this is another one of those ideological divides because more liberal Christians tend to glorify doubt and questions and skepticism, and they kind of advertise: you can come here and believe anything or nothing; but for the more conservative side of the spectrum, it is often something that we try to cover up, isn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, there are a lot of, I think, closet skeptics who go to church on Sunday. They say: Sure, I believe all the great tenets – the beliefs – concerning Christianity; but down deep, they really have questions. Is Jesus Christ really who he claims to be?

DAVE BAST

I will never forget a young man in one of my congregations; this was probably 25 years ago; but he asked to come and see me, and he sat down in my study; and as we began to talk he finally opened up and he said: I just can't believe; and, wow, how do you respond to that? How do you try to help him; but I also wondered: How many more like that are there out there, who deep down find it really hard even to believe in God...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Or to believe in Christ?

BOB HEERSPINK

And it is not as if we want to celebrate skepticism. I mean, you could become the eternal skeptic, which I think, in a sense, keeps you from really committing yourself to anything...

DAVE BAST

That is a cynic.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is the cynic.

DAVE BAST

If we want to distinguish between skeptic and cynic. The cynic doesn't believe in anything. He just blows it all away.

BOB HEERSPINK

But to think hard and critically about Jesus – to become a critical thinker about who Jesus is, is something that I think is important for anyone who really wants to grow in their faith.

DAVE BAST

I don't think we should ever discourage asking tough questions, or being honest about what we really think and feel.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and Jesus invited that. Jesus invited us to ask questions about who he really is. He talked about that with his own disciples.

DAVE BAST

Yes; let me just read this very famous passage; it is in Matthew 16. Jesus and his disciples are in an area called Caesarea Philippi, which was actually a gentile area to the north of Galilee; and this is how Matthew reports what happened:

¹³When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵“But what about you?” He asked. “Who do you say that I am?”

BOB HEERSPINK

So, people were asking questions in Jesus’ own day. I mean, they are not naïve. We often think that people in the First Century were gullible. They would believe anything that was told them about Jesus; but people that Jesus encountered were trying to figure out just who was this guy?

DAVE BAST

And there are a lot of answers that pop up, some of them quite discreditable toward Jesus. Listen to this; here, I will read again in Mark 3:20: Jesus entered a house and a crowd gathered so that he and his disciples were not even to eat. ²¹When his family heard about it, they went to take charge of him...listen to this...for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

BOB HEERSPINK

They thought he was mad.

DAVE BAST

His own family!

BOB HEERSPINK

He was mentally ill, making these kinds of claims.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, he was pretty mind-boggling, the things that he said and did; so, that is one option – one opinion.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and then the Pharisees come along and they ask the question: Is he demon possessed? In fact, one of the issues that Jesus had to confront was the leaders of the Jews saying in John Chapter 20: Is Jesus possessed by a demon?

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, earlier on, even, another little incident in the Gospel, when Jesus was healing people from demon possession, his enemies said: Well yes, sure, he can do that. He casts out demons by the prince of demons; and Jesus replied: you know, that is ludicrous because a house divided against itself cannot stand. If I am using evil to overcome evil, that just doesn’t make sense.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; these extremely negative ideas about Jesus can be dismissed pretty quickly. Jesus with his wisdom did not come across as someone who was psychotic. The suggestion that he is demon possessed falls on the basis that the Devil doesn’t war against his own kingdom; but there were people who were also saying something much nicer about Jesus. In fact, Peter even talks about that as the first option that he offers concerning Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is the response in Matthew 16: Some are saying you are Elijah come back to life or John the Baptist come back to life, or one of the prophets; and probably, I think most people today would agree that Jesus was a wonderful person. He was a great religious teacher. He was a prophet. That would probably be the most

common default answer of most non-Christians throughout the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

Sure; he is some kind of guru that we can place on the same kind of pedestal that we do other great spiritual teachers in other religions.

DAVE BAST

But, if that is so, I think there is more that needs to be said about that. Was Jesus only a prophet? Actually, that is what Islam says, among other religious views. He was not the greatest prophet, but maybe number two.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, Dave, you are right; a lot of people think of Jesus as simply a good teacher, a wonderful guru like so many others in the world; but what about Jesus? How does he see himself? That is what we really have to ask and investigate. Who does Jesus claim to be?

DAVE BAST

So, let's look at that in a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Hi; you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into the scriptures as the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

Okay, Bob, we have been talking about skepticism in this program; and really, in a sense we are calling for Christians to be honest about our doubts; even perhaps our doubts about who Jesus is, and who God is. The most fundamental questions of faith: Do we even believe in God; and why do we believe in Christ? Why is he more than just a prophet?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; we have been talking about the options that existed back in the First Century, and still exist in the Twenty-First Century about who Jesus might be. Was he a mad man? Was he insane in the claims he was making? Was he simply a good prophet...another wise teacher?

DAVE BAST

Yes, the thing that most people would probably say today: Jesus was a great religious leader. Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, they are all up there; Moses; he is one of the pantheon of moral and religious figures in our world history.

BOB HEERSPINK

And so the question we really have to ask is: Is that the way Jesus saw himself? And I think we have to say no.

DAVE BAST

Yes; or is that the way the New Testament portrays him? Going back again to our main scripture passage for this program from Matthew 16, it is the story of Jesus questioning his disciples at Caesarea Philippi: Who do people say that I am? And they give the response: Most people think you are one of the prophets – maybe even a great prophet come back to life, like Elijah; or come back to the world, you know, from heaven. And then he goes on: Who do *you* say that I am? What do *you* think? Very inductive, incidentally. He doesn't

announce it first of all to them, he wants them to come back to him, and as usual, Peter speaking for the whole says:

¹⁶You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; what a statement. You would expect that Jesus would say: Now, wait a minute. Modesty prevents me...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

From accepting *that* kind of designation.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, I think of that passage right at the end of Revelation, where John falls down to worship the angel and the angel picks him up and says: Don't do that! Worship God. Why doesn't Jesus say to Peter: Don't say that!

BOB HEERSPINK

But what he does say is: you've got it right: ¹⁷"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

DAVE BAST

Yes; he doesn't just endorse what Peter says. He says: Peter, you got that straight from God.

BOB HEERSPINK

You got it straight from my Father.

DAVE BAST

From God's mouth to your ear. I am the Son of God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Jesus claims to be divine. He is not just another teacher; he is not just another prophet. He really does claim to be God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and the amazing thing about that is not the Messiah part. Most people could have said that, maybe; especially if they were close to Jesus...

BOB HEERSPINK

That you are the Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the way the disciples were. They saw his miracles –mighty acts; and they expected a human champion to come. They didn't... Nobody thought that the Messiah would be divine. They thought the Messiah would be a human champion who would redeem Israel and set them back up on top; that he would do mighty works, but you know, he was just going to be the last in the line.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, that is really what got Jesus crucified – this claim to be God. There were other people running around that were claiming to be messiahs or christs; but what really got Jesus into hot water with the Pharisees was his claim to divinity. In fact, later in his ministry he says: Before Abraham [*was*] I Am...

DAVE BAST

And when he said that he was really claiming the divine name of God – the I AM THAT I AM – Yahweh – as a name that applies to himself.

DAVE BAST

And the people who heard him say that...that is, incidentally, from John 8, knew very well what he was getting at because it says that some of them picked up stones in order to stone him because they thought it was blasphemy, that any person would make that claim, the divine name; wow. So, this is what Jesus says about himself, not that I am a prophet, but I am actually God; I am God in the flesh.

BOB HEERSPINK

This is where we are at, really, in terms of facing up to Jesus' claims, and to say: Do we really believe who Jesus claims to be?

DAVE BAST

I love C. S. Lewis, I always have, all my life; and maybe his greatest book in some ways is *Mere Christianity*; and the greatest quote from that, certainly the most famous, is a quote that gets exactly at this issue of Jesus' claims. Lewis writes: I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him, which is: I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. This is the one thing we must *not* say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher, he would either be a lunatic or a liar or the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool; you can spit on him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God; but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is his claim, to be divine; and I think we have to ask the question, frankly, especially if we are going to hear that question from the skeptics' corner: Should we believe it? Is this really creditable?

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, another option is: No, it is all made up. Somebody just invented this story. It is all a fantasy; it is all fiction. So, how do we respond to that?

BOB HEERSPINK

But you know, God himself knew this was going to be a huge thing for us to believe, and that is why God the Father himself gave a sign as to the credibility of Jesus' identity.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

He didn't leave us simply with a big question mark over Jesus. He said: I am going to do something in history that is going to put my stamp of approval on who Jesus claims to be.

DAVE BAST

So, let's address that in just a moment: The divine sign that endorses Jesus' credibility; but first, we want to talk about how you could join us in this conversation on our website.

BOB HEERSPINK

Listeners like you make *Groundwork* what it is. Our website, groundworkonline.com, is another way that we work to join you as you dig deeper into the scriptures. There, we continue to reflect on today's discussion about our world and the Bible, as well as many other conversations that listeners have begun about scripture

and how it interacts with their lives.

We would also like you to help us think about upcoming programs. One of the topics we are going to talk about is the problem of evil. Is it possible to answer the problem of evil? How do we as Christians reconcile a good God with all of the evil we see in the world? Share your thoughts on these upcoming questions. Finding us is easy. Just visit our website, groundworkonline.com.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

All right, Bob; we have been talking about skepticism and faith – being honest with our doubts; even our doubts perhaps about who God is and who Jesus is; and we have looked at some of the ideas common at his time, common in our time about who Jesus is and how he claims to be God himself; and that naturally now brings us to the question: Why should we believe those claims? Why should we accept what the New Testament says, or even what it reports Jesus as saying concerning his identity as God?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes. There is someone in scripture who would help us on that score, and that is Thomas, the disciple of Jesus; because Thomas had this big streak of skepticism in him...I mean...

DAVE BAST

Doubting Thomas.

BOB HEERSPINK

He was the doubter. When he heard these stories about what happened three days after Jesus was crucified, he is ready to pack his bags and go home. He is writing Jesus off. The notion that Jesus could be alive, that has to be just rumors. The problem is, there are these followers of Jesus who cannot handle the facts.

DAVE BAST

Yes; when I think of Thomas, I often compare him with Eeyore...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

You know, the gloomy donkey in the Winnie the Pooh stories. Thomas was a doubter, not because he was one of these modern, sort of hard-edged atheists. It wasn't so much that. Yes, he wanted proof, but proof because to him it was almost too good to be true. Thomas seems...what little we know about him from the New Testament, he seems to be one of those people who just had trouble believing and accepting good news. There is one little incident earlier where they are on their way to Jerusalem for the last time, and Thomas says: Well, let's go along that we may die with him also.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thomas is not a romanticist. He is a realist. He has almost got a little bit of scientific orientation. He wants to do some tests on Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, he is the guy who says: Look, this is not going to end well. I can see where this is all going; and it doesn't end well, and then it is hard for him to accept that, whoa, wait a minute. There might be yet another chapter.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and that other chapter is recorded in John Chapter 20, because Thomas wasn't there for the first appearance of Jesus to the disciples.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that will teach you to skip church, incidentally. That was Easter Sunday, and now it is a week later.

BOB HEERSPINK

You skip church and Jesus shows up and you aren't there.

DAVE BAST

You aren't there.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, Jesus has to make this special appearance. John 20:26:

A week later, his disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe." ²⁸ And Thomas's response, "My Lord and my God."

DAVE BAST

The only possible response when you come face to face, or maybe we should say heart to heart with the risen Lord Jesus. You either dismiss it all as a lie or you fall down and worship him. This is the key thing. It is the resurrection. Paul put it this way in Romans Chapter 1:

⁴He was declared to be the Son of God with power through his resurrection from the dead.

That is not saying the resurrection made him the Son of God, or somehow turned this man Jesus into a divine being. It is saying it was this fact that revealed once and for all to the whole cosmos who Jesus truly was.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right. You can go to other religions. They have their teachers; they have their gurus. None claimed to rise from the dead.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

The fact is, when Thomas sees Jesus, he not only calls him Lord and God, he goes right back to Jesus' original claim concerning himself. Jesus is God incarnate – God with us; and the resurrection demonstrates it – proves it.

DAVE BAST

Yes. Our faith really stands or falls on this thing. I mean, again I am with Paul, who saw it so clearly. He said: If Christ has not been raised, well then, let's just eat and drink because we don't have anything. What we have been proclaiming is that he is God. He is the one who rose from the dead. So, if it didn't happen, well then, just forget about it.

BOB HEERSPINK

But, you know, Thomas was there at the resurrection. We don't have that privilege.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

Flannery O'Connor tells a story about a murderer who, at this certain moment in which he is preparing to do a terrible crime begins to think about the resurrection of Jesus and says: you know, if Jesus really is risen from the dead, it turns everything upside down; but how do you know? I should have been there. I should

have seen with my own eyes whether all of this was true.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, he is right. It does change everything. It does turn everything upside down; but I don't think he is right about that we had to be there. In fact, if you go back to the story in John...this is maybe the most beautiful part...yes, we can imagine Thomas; how awesome that must be to actually touch the risen flesh of Christ; but I am not sure that it says he did. I think he just fell down when Jesus invited him to. He didn't quite dare do that...he didn't have to.

BOB HEERSPINK

And maybe that says something to us; that we don't have to be there to truly believe. In fact, Jesus said...He said to Thomas: ^{John 20:29}Because you have seen me, you believe; but blessed are those who have not seen, and yet are going to believe.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is as though he is looking down the corridors of time and history, and he is seeing people like us, you know.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

We haven't seen him. We weren't there in the flesh; but through his Spirit he is alive. The Spirit is with us. It has been poured out upon his followers. We can believe, and we can come to know him; and realize that that does change everything.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, millions have heard this message – this Good News – of who Jesus Christ claims to be, and the message of his death and resurrection; and when they have heard it... You know, the book of Acts talks about being cut to the quick. There is something that happens internally within our spirits. It is not just hearing a moving story; it is not just an emotional response. The Spirit of the risen Christ reaches out and touches our souls and compels belief that this truly is the Messiah of God – the Son of the living God.

DAVE BAST

And that faith – that belief – changes everything. It changes the way we look at sin and evil because that won't have the last word. It changes the way we look at death because even our lives will be taken up into his resurrection life. It changes the way we look at the whole history of the universe because we believe that God is in control and he will bring victory even out of the worst defeat. That is what we believe. What do you believe?

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today; and don't forget that it is listeners like you asking questions and participating in our conversation through the website that keeps our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and give us suggestions for topics or maybe passages from the Bible that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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Printed on July 26, 2025