

Grace, Faith, and Becoming Holy

DAVE BAST

Someone once remarked that whenever any biblical writer wanted to make a point about faith, they said: Look at Abraham. Well, that observation certainly holds true for the Apostle Paul. For him, Abraham was the paradigm of what living by faith means, and what a living faith does for you. So today on *Groundwork*, as we consider one of the most basic ideas of basic Christianity, the necessity of living by faith, we will follow that old advice: We will look at Abraham. 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 Scott, we have come now to the fourth program in the series we are calling basic Christianity. It is a book title by John Stott. It is also an homage, I guess, in a way to C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. We are talking about the most fundamental ideas or beliefs of the Christian faith that pretty much all Christians have always believed and hold in common.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and so, we have looked at the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and in the last program we talked about God's plan of salvation. So, when we looked at humanity we said we messed things up—we sinned—the creation fell and needed rescuing; and in the last program—in the third program of this five-part series—we looked at salvation and how God made promises early and fulfilled them all in Jesus. Salvation is God's supreme work right after creation; but now, the question for this program is: How do we hook into that? So, Jesus came and he died and he rose again and there is great saving power in him, but how do we hook into that? How do we make that our own?

DAVE BAST

Right. When we talk about basic Christianity, there are certain words or terms that are just essential, and grace is one of those. That was really the subject of our last program, how it is all God's grace; it is a gift; it is something he does for us; we cannot save ourselves, really. We will explore that a little bit more in this program; but like any gift, it has to be received.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And there is a way of receiving that, and that way is called faith. So Paul, for example, writing in his letter to the Romans in Chapter 5:2 says:

Through whom (or that is, Christ) we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. It is as though there he is picturing grace as kind of a realm or a territory, and you have to enter it—you have to stand within it—and the way you get in is through faith, by putting your trust—your belief—in Jesus Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, I said a minute ago, and this is not really the way to phrase it, I said: How do we hook up with that? Well, we can't. We are dead in our sins, so it is grace. God has to come, and faith is the first gift God gives us in salvation; and I have heard lots of different images for faith. Faith has been compared to sort of the antenna that picks up on and beams in God's signal, or faith is the pipe through which the waters of baptism flow into us, or faith is the electrical conduit by which the Holy Spirit hooks up and pumps his juice into us. Whatever it is, faith is the instrument through which the grace of God, and therefore all of the salvation of Christ, flows into us. So, faith is obviously central, and faith is a theme throughout the entire scripture, including starting very early on in the Abraham story.

DAVE BAST

Right; we want to go back to that. I mean, there is so much we could say about this, and as you point out, faith is both a gift that God gives to us, and it is something that we do, because we do do the believing. So, there is the mystery there of both sides of the equation, but going back again to Genesis, we talked a lot about Genesis, and specifically about the covenant story in Genesis Chapter 15. Now we want to look at how that chapter opens. So, just to start with verse 1, we read this:

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward,"² but Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me, since I remain childless, and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"³ Then Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁴Then the word of the Lord came to him, "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir."⁵ And God took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky. Count the stars, if indeed you can count them." And then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (And then this, Genesis 15:6)⁶ Abram believed the Lord and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness.

DAVE BAST

So, here is the story. As we said, it is the starting point for God's salvation for the world. He calls Abraham. He promises a land that he will show him, and he promises him descendants. So, Abram starts out; he obeys God by faith. He sets out for the land, and eventually he gets there. They have a little trouble; he kind of leaves for awhile and he comes back. Now, some years have passed, and Abraham and Sarah still don't have any children...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they ain't getting any younger, either.

DAVE BAST

No, exactly; and so God appears to him again; and you know, this wonderful... And Abraham says: Hey, excuse me; time out, God. You know, could I point something out to you? We still don't have that child that you promised.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And in fact, I have had to make one of my servants my heir, because, as you know, we are not getting any younger and I am afraid...you know, what is going to happen to all of my stuff?

SCOTT HOEZEE

You've got to have a will. So, this kid is going to inherit it, who is not even related to me; and God says: No, no, no, no. We know in the story that it is going to take a little bit longer, and even though the faith of Abraham is praised here in the 15th chapter, other things are going to happen. You know, Abraham eventually tries to force a son by having relations with his maidservant, Hagar; and they a son named Ishmael; and God says: Nope, not that one either...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It takes 25 years before Isaac is born; and yet, when Abram believes what God says here in Genesis 15, God says that makes him a righteous person. Well, how does that work? How exactly did that go? We don't know; I mean, ultimately we are going to say that was beyond Abraham's ability to believe on his own, that God gave him the ability to do that; but once God gives you that ability, you still have to believe it and act on it, and that is where the righteousness comes to us by faith alone.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, the message, or the lesson of this whole story is: Abraham, you are not going to make this happen by your own ingenuity—by your own human effort. You are going to have to wait for me because the child that I give you is going to be a miracle; pointing to the even greater miracle of the birth of *the* child who would come in the Gospel when Jesus came into the world. It is just something you have to go on trusting and believing that it will happen. Your descendents will be like the stars in the sky; they will be like the sand by the seashore...more than you can count...and even there it is not really about your natural children, Abraham. There is still that essential promise I made to bless the whole world through you. But Abraham's response of faith is, in the eyes of the Apostle Paul at least, the secret to the whole question of how we enter God's grace; and we will look at what Paul has to say about that in just a moment.

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

Just looking, Dave, at Genesis 15, and that landmark 6th verse that Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness; and it reminds me, I heard a speaker one time say: You know, individual words in verses, especially key verses in the Bible...if you make the analogy to a piano keyboard, Genesis 15:6 isn't just like plunking down one key; no, this thing is going to form chords with the whole of scripture, and a really big one comes up in Romans.

DAVE BAST

Right; it will echo and re-echo throughout the pages of the Bible; and it seems to have been one of Paul's favorite verses. You might say he claimed it as his life verse. So, listen to what he says in Romans 4. This is his riff on the story of Genesis 15; so bear that in mind. Paul writes:

¹⁶Therefore, the promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace, and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring; not only those who are of the Law, but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷As it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations." (That is, incidentally, the meaning of the name Abraham.) He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed; the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being the things that were not.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁸Against all hope, Abraham, in hope, believed; and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ¹⁹Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead, since he was a hundred years old. Sarah’s womb was also dead, ²⁰yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith, and gave glory to God, ²¹being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised, ²²and that is why it was credited to him as righteousness. ²³Now, the words, “It was credited to him,” were written, not for him alone, ²⁴but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness for those who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

DAVE BAST

So, that is one of the crucial verses, really—passages of the New Testament—in its explanation of how the Gospel works; and it is something that Paul never tired of stressing, that the righteousness that gets us forgiven, that makes us open to God’s mercy...it is a righteousness that we claim by faith, not something that we possess in ourselves. It is not something we work up or somehow produce by doing good works, which is really the way common to most human religions, most human beings. The thought is: Yes, you know, you have got to pay your way; you have got to earn your way with God; you have got to try to be a good person; you have got to do this; you have got to do that; maybe be more religious, or at least be a good...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Try harder.

DAVE BAST

Yes; at least be good to your, you know, the people that you know, and then God will somehow give you a passing grade; and the Bible says no, it doesn’t work that way. It is a righteousness that we simply claim by faith that God has earned for us in Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. John Calvin called the doctrine of justification the hinge of the Reformation. The whole Reformation hinged on, really, passages like the one we just read in Romans Chapter 4, because it is, as you just said, Dave, the end of striving; it is the end of try harder; it is the end of, well, God grades on the curve and if you are good enough, you will get into heaven. No, it is a gift. It is a faith that allows you to embrace the impossible promises of God and believe that they are possible after all, as Abraham had to do; and so, it really does all hinge on if we have been made right with God, which is again what justification means, then it is not because of something we did, it is because of Jesus, who was crucified and raised by God’s power from the dead for our justification; and faith is the gift God gives to us to let us look at the Gospel. I mean, lots of people read the Bible and just say: I don’t believe that. That is too incredible to believe. I mean, I don’t believe that Good Friday and Easter story at all. We read it and say: Oh, my; that is the truth. That is the absolute truth. I believe that with everything I have. Well, that is the gift of God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it really is. You know, Paul opens his letter to the Romans, which is, I guess, the classic place in the whole New Testament that explains this Gospel message of justification by faith, with this wonderful statement in Chapter 1. He says:

¹⁶I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes; to the Jew first and also to the gentile.

So, if you believe, it is the power of God that saves you; if you don’t believe, it is really nothing to you. Faith is the key, and even that faith, as you said, Scott, is in some ways a gift that God gives. So, it is all grace all the time. It is nothing we do; even our faith is not a work that we do that somehow earns us merit in God’s eyes. The thing that Paul says, especially about Abraham’s story, is that it is all about us. It is not just about Abraham. It is not just about the land of Israel in the Middle East. It is not just about the Jewish people. It is about us. It is about everyone who has faith in God, who has put their trust in Christ. The ultimate fulfillment

of those promises to Abraham was not literal; it was, I guess we could say, spiritual. It is believers who are the descendents of Abraham, that number the stars; and it is heaven that is our true Promised Land. It is the world to come. It is the new creation that God has promised.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this gift of faith is so central to recognize that it is a gift—that it is grace. When Paul wrote another letter, to the Galatians, the Galatians had come to believe that they had to chip into their salvation after all. After Paul left, some false teachers came and said: Oh, no, no. Jesus doesn't save you, not completely. He gets you most of the way home. You have got to finish it by doing some stuff yourself. Paul heard about this and just went off. He was livid; and so he wrote this letter to the Galatians, and at one point in Galatians he writes:

2:16 We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ; and so, too, we have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ, not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified...²¹I do not set aside the grace of God, because if righteousness could be gained through the law, well then, Christ died for nothing.

In other words, it is all or nothing here. It is all Christ or we are not saved, because you cannot save yourself. If there had been another way...if we could have done it on our own...well, God would have done that. He wouldn't have his own Son die if there was some easier way out. There was no easy way out for salvation to come. It had to come through the death of God's Son; and that righteousness comes to us now through faith.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is really the difference between having a performance-based relationship with God and a trust-based relationship with God; and it is kind of like the difference between belonging to a team or a family, you know. A team...that is performance based. They may say we are like one big, happy family on the team; but try going a whole season without getting a hit, and see how that family thing works out. It is performance, and nothing but; and eventually everybody finds that they can no longer perform, even the most gifted people. They just cannot cut it; and that is what Paul is saying to the Galatians: We cannot cut it if our salvation is performance based—if that is how we relate to God and are right in his eyes. It has got to be by faith, or else Christ's death is meaningless.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is all faith, it is all grace. That is how we are justified, but there is another word to be spoken as we look at this basic Christianity series, Dave. Nothing we do can save us, but once we are saved, we do have some things to do. It is called sanctification, and we will think about that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today, in the midst of a series on basic Christianity, we are talking about the basic ideas of justification by faith, the importance of salvation by grace through faith; but also to allude to a passage of Paul in Ephesians 2, it is for the sake of good works. We don't leave those out, because one of the criticisms of the doctrine of salvation by faith alone—faith in Christ alone—is: Well, if all I've got to do is somehow believe, I can kind of do what I want...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, live it up.

DAVE BAST

I can live...yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God will forgive me tomorrow anyway, right? Paul encountered that kind of spirit of libertinism early, early in the Church. He addresses it in Romans 6, as well. He has heard people say, so he says: Some of you are saying: Well, shouldn't we just sin more so that God can give us more grace? And Paul basically says: No, if you think...

DAVE BAST

God forbid! Yes, God forbid!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you don't get it if you think that. In baptism you were given a whole new identity; you were given a whole new set of innards, spiritually speaking; so you cannot say: Oh, I want to sin more now that I am a Christian, because who cares anyway? I am saved by grace. That shows that you don't get it. What we are called to...justification happens once and for all, right? But then, what comes next theologically in what we sometimes call the order of salvation or the *ordo salutis* is something called *sanctification*, from the Latin word *sanctus*, which means holy...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we are being made...by the Spirit...we are being made more holy on account of our baptism.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and faith that produces justification or results in justification...as you said, a one-time deal; it is credited to us as righteousness when we trust in Christ, just as it was for Abraham when he believed the promises of God; but that leads to an ongoing life. Probably no one in the history of the Church—no theologian—was more associated with the idea of justification by faith than Martin Luther, and he thundered home on this. This was the linchpin of the Reformation. It is what really set the whole thing going; and here is a famous statement that he made about justification; but listen carefully to what Luther writes: It is clear, then, that a Christian has all that he needs in faith, and needs no work to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law. This is that Christian liberty, our faith. Now, listen to this. So, he has made his point. We don't rely on the law to merit our acceptance with God, but it does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness, but rather makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness.

So, even Luther, in his classic statement on justification says: But we don't just sort of lapse into doing nothing, or sinning, because we are basically transformed by this kind of faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and Luther was very good on that. People...some of our listeners who know their theology and their Reformation history well know that there was a little bit of a disagreement. I mean, Calvin and Luther...John Calvin and Martin Luther agreed on most everything. Calvin, though, wanted to say: Well, we want to have what we are going to call the third use of the law as a rule of gratitude. So, in Calvinist Reformed Churches, you would often hear the Ten Commandments still read as part of confession and assurance, to remind us this is how we are supposed to live now that we have been totally saved. You wouldn't hear the Ten Commandments as much in a Lutheran Church because Luther thought: Well, we just have to put away the law and let the Spirit guide us. It is kind of, in some ways, a distinction without a difference, ultimately, where Luther and Calvin came out; but the idea is, yes, God didn't save you just for you to become some, you know, unproductive, bad person. He saved you to look more and more like Jesus every day.

DAVE BAST

Right; and you know, that positive approach to the law, or attitude toward the law, is something we also talked about in an earlier series on justice, and Calvin's distinctive understanding of that positive...that guide for grateful living idea; but this is what faith actually leads us to do. In fact, in the very passage that we read earlier from Galatians 2, where Paul talks about it is impossible that we could be justified by works of the law, he drops in this beautiful statement, where he says: [0:21:38.5] ²⁰I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

So, what justifying faith actually does is unite us with Christ in so strong a union, Paul could say: I am not even living anymore. It is Christ who is living in me. I have a whole new life that I live, and it has got to be the Jesus life...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I want to live like he did.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And anyone...and I think we have talked about this on *Groundwork* before on previous programs...but anyone who knows the letter to the Galatians well knows that, indeed, Paul spends the first half of the letter—three or four out of six chapters—Paul is just hammering away at the Galatians: Forget about your works. It is not about you. It has nothing to do with what you do. Stop thinking about what you do. It is all Jesus; and then all of a sudden, you get to Galatians 5, and Paul says: Now, here is a whole bunch of works of the flesh you just cannot do, and here are the fruit of the Spirit that you *must* do, so keep step with that Spirit. So, now all of a sudden Paul is saying: Now, think about what you do, after all; but it is not contradictory.

DAVE BAST

Yes; in fact, he says in Chapter 5, early on...he talks... The big deal in Galatians was you had to be circumcised, that is what they were saying.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and maybe keep kosher with the food laws, too, and such.

DAVE BAST

To undertake the whole ceremonial Judaic law in order to really be right with God; and in Galatians 5 Paul says: You know what? Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything, but faith working through love. So, even there in the classic insistence on salvation through faith alone—by grace alone—in Christ alone—Paul says: But you know what? That faith gives itself to love, and love is the whole law. I mean, love summarizes the law: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself; and that is what impels us to pursue that; that is what sanctification really means.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and you know, justification is such unalloyedly good news. God has saved you once and for all. Sanctification, though, we sometimes feel a little guilty or bad. Sometimes we look at our lives and we say: You know, I don't think I am getting any better; or, some of the bad habits I had in my 20s are even worse now in my 50s. What is going on? But we keep pressing on. We know God does forgive our failures, our failures to be more holy, but we also have that ironclad promise and belief of Pentecost that the Spirit is still with us; the Spirit isn't done with us; we will keep working with God; we will keep making some progress; and in the end, when we die, we still are not going to be perfect, but the Bible says God will burn off all of our imperfections, and *then* we shall be fully like Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what you would like us to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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