
Jesus: The Image of God

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the Church, there are some topics that are very important. The image of God is one of them. It is a vital truth in terms of understanding who we are as human beings, but if you go looking for specific verses about the image of God in the Bible, you will not find a lot. However, sometimes a topic is important because of where it comes up. The image of God, for instance, comes up right in the creation story. Then we do not hear much about it until it makes a roaring comeback in connection to Jesus. Today on *Groundwork*, let's think about what it means in the New Testament that Jesus is the absolutely perfect image of God.

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, we are continuing now with this four-part series – this is now the third program – looking at the different ways the New Testament presents Jesus. What are some of the pictures, the metaphors, that they use for Jesus? And we have looked at the Word of God, we have looked at the Wisdom of God, and now today, we see Jesus as the perfect Image of God.

DAVE BAST

This idea of Image of God gets a great deal of play right at the beginning in the creation story in maybe one of the most significant verses of that story from Genesis 1:26 and following. The Bible reveals to us that we have a very special quality as human beings. We are made in the image of God; so, it goes like this: ²⁶Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image – interesting plural pronoun there – in *our* image – the Church fathers picked up on that one – in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky; over the livestock and all the wild animals; and over all of the creatures that move along the ground.” ²⁷So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply,” and so on and so forth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; fill the earth; rule over the fish. So, there it is, and the image of God – we are 26, 27 verses into the entire Bible, and this concept comes up at the climax of Genesis one's creation story; that we are in the image of God, and it has tantalized theologians all along: Jewish theologians, Christian theologians: What does that mean? Because the Bible nowhere says – oh, by the way, when we say – you do not go to the Bible to look up a dictionary definition of any term; but certainly, there is no one passage that says: When we talk about “Image of God” it means – and then tells us; no, you have to infer. You have to look at the surrounding context and say: What is the content of this image?

DAVE BAST

Right; so, some people have said: Well, look; it is the story of creation; therefore, the fact that we are creators, in a sense, we have creativity; we make things; we make art. To be in the image of God is to be, in a sense, a mini creator.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, God is the big creator with a capital C; we are the little creators, small c. Certainly, there is also the pro-creating aspect. Right in Genesis 1, we no sooner hear this idea about being made in God's image, and we are told they are male and female, that the image is both and both together, and then, no sooner are they created in God's image, then God says: Go be fruitful and multiply. The ability to make other images of God by having little babies, who are now in the image of God; that is also the creative...

DAVE BAST

Interesting, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that seems to be part of the image.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and this idea of male/female that you mentioned... Karl Barth, the great Reformed theologian of the 20th Century, suggested that it is perhaps our ability to be in relationship that really constitutes the divine image; and we mentioned just in passing that that pronoun: Let *us* make humans in *our* image; and Christians have always seen there at least an echo of the fact that God himself is a community of persons; God himself is in relationship; he is never just a solitary monism or individual being. So, that is part of the image of God, surely; our relational nature.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That ability to see each other. Also, right in the neighborhood here, in Genesis 1, is God's command that we take care of the earth, that we rule it; in the next chapter, that we tend it, keep it. So, God made the creation, and now one of the ways by which we look like God is when we take care of what God made. We are caretakers and earth-keepers, and that is part of the image of God. No other creatures on the planet have the ability to take care of other creatures, but we do. So, that makes us look like God; and then you get more theological. John Calvin said that what was the image of God before people fell into sin? Well, Calvin thought they had been created in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. There is that triplet all over the place in John Calvin's theology. True knowledge, righteousness, and holiness; in other words, before we sinned, part of what it meant – maybe a big part of what it meant – to bear God's image is that we could know God; we could live like God; we could be righteous; we could be in a right relationship with God and the creation; and we were holy. We did not have any sin; so, we looked like God in those ways.

DAVE BAST

So, we really were like God. In that sense, we were the spitting image of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The spitting image of God; and so, it was a huge gift. Especially in the Reformed tradition, but I think other traditions have said and observed this, too; that the image obviously has a lot of content. It obviously means a whole lot more than maybe we even know to this day; but whatever it was, God's giving it as a special gift to humanity was a very big gift. It was a gift of enormous significance and beauty; which is why, especially in the Reformed tradition, we have seen sin as being so monstrous.

DAVE BAST

Right. Because the story goes on in Genesis, as I am sure most of our listeners know, in Genesis 3, to show how we marred the image of God. We spoiled it. We vandalized it. It is like taking a wonderful painting and just slashing it or throwing paint at it or something. So, we no longer have this intact image of God. There are still some traces of it. There is a sense – everyone has humanity – everyone is still an image bearer of God – but it is all ruined; it is all spoiled; it is all twisted.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of course, some people put it: It is like an ember still glowing. It is not the roaring flame of the image, but it is sort of like a glowing coal that is waiting to be fanned back into flame.

The sad thing, too, about Genesis 3 – you mentioned it, Dave; so just really quickly: We remember the story of the serpent and Eve, and the way the serpent seduced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit was by saying: If you do this, you will be like God. The sad thing is, Eve forgot that they were already like God. They were in his likeness and image, but they wanted just a little bit more, and by wanting more, they actually vandalized the beautiful artwork that was humanity in the image of God. And now, ever since, we have not looked like God very much, and we do not see God in each other very much either.

DAVE BAST

Well, and frankly, let's be honest about it; there are some people in which it is very hard to see God, and see God's image. They have so sunk into evil; but on the other hand, there is a little bit of that problem in each of us, and each of us is skewed and broken; and so, we are able to look out at others and things like racism or sexism or...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Classism...

DAVE BAST

Classism...

SCOTT HOEZEE

All of those isms...

DAVE BAST

All those isms. You know, sometimes we make fun of that and we talk about, oh, it is not PC to blah, blah, blah. Well, no, it is not Christian, it is not biblical to look at others and dismiss them because of their differences to us; and that is part of the marring of God's image in us, that we are able to do that to whole categories of people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, clearly, at the dawn of creation God wanted us to be different than what we tend to be now. So, something had to be done to start getting that image restored. If that was an ember still glowing, what will fan that back into flame? We will look at what God did to accomplish that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Scott, we are talking about Jesus as the Image of God, and so far we have not really mentioned Jesus. We have been talking about humans as the image of God – the creation story – and that drops out a little bit after Genesis, and we do not hear a lot about this idea of image or image of God for a while; until we get to the Gospel and the coming of Christ into the world, and then perhaps it is not surprising that image idea reappears; the image of the image in the person of Jesus, and here is one place where it happens. It is in Colossians Chapter 1, beginning at verse 15:

The Son is the image of the invisible God; the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. All things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things and in him all things hold together. That is Colossians 1:15-17.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So there Paul is very clearly calling Jesus the Image; and then the author of the Hebrews – not sure who wrote Hebrews, but it was not Paul – but this writer, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tumbled to the same thing in the very first verses of Hebrews, Chapter 1, where Hebrews begins:

¹In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful Word. So, there again, the exact radiance; the Image of God; Jesus is the Son, who is his Father all over again, as they say. He is the express Image of God, par excellence.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and two great words in those passages; both from first chapters; the first chapter of Colossians – the first chapter of Hebrews. In Colossians, when it says that Jesus is the Image of God, the word there is *icon*, which came to describe a painting that was a true picture of the individual who was being painted – an icon – and many icons used in the Eastern Church to decorate their churches. The word in Hebrews is even, in a sense, maybe more interesting. That word translated “exact representation” is the Greek word *kharakter*, from which we get character; and it meant a die that would stamp an image on a coin; so it was exactly equivalent to that which it was depicting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Some of the – if I remember correctly – some of the older translations of Hebrews 1 said that he bore the exact stamp of his Father's being; so that image of stamp used to get in there; that is, in some of the translations. So, here is the important thing, Dave. It is easy to think: Well, of course Jesus was the image of God; he is God. We saw that in John 1 in the first program of this series, that the Word was with God because the Word is God. So, of course, Jesus is like the image.... but what we have to remember is that what Paul is saying, and what the author of Hebrews is saying is that Jesus is not the exact image of God just in his divinity, it is also his humanity. What happened when the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus was she gave birth to the first unspoiled image of God as a human being also since Adam and Eve.

DAVE BAST

There is a great New Testament theme, Paul mentions it especially Romans 5, that Jesus is the second Adam. He is the perfect example of what Adam should have been and should have done; and he is going to undo all that Adam has done; he is going to take care of this problem of us wrecking the image of God in his humanity and in his human life by being the obedient one. So, yes, in everything that he is and does, we see not only who God is, but we see what people are supposed to be, and what they are going to be again someday because of what he has done for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if we loop back to the first segment where we talked a little bit about what theologians have said over the centuries, when Genesis 1 tells us we were created in God's image, what does that mean? And we said, well, it means a whole lot of things. One of the things it means is that... John Calvin said we would have perfect knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Well, Jesus was that. He knew God well. He came to explain God to us authoritatively and accurately; so Jesus was able to point us to God and to the love of God and to the grace of God; but another thing we said from Genesis 1 that a lot of theologians have said is that part of what the image means is that we have proper and good relationships with other people; and you think of Jesus' life; he was always reaching out in love, especially to the marginalized, to the down-and-outers, to the people a lot of others in society would ignore. That is the image of God in Jesus as well; having loving relationships.

DAVE BAST

The fact is that often we think of this idea, I suppose, of being in the image of God as being a purely spiritual concept. It is having to do with that sort of stuff you cannot see, or your moral values and all the rest, and as

we saw in linking it to creation and creativity, it is also rooted very much in physicality; and I think that Jesus shows that, too. I mean, you think about his life in the Gospels and how appealing he was; how attractive to all sorts of people; and even some of the critiques that he had to experience: He was too physical. He liked good food and he turned water into wine and they called him a glutton and a winebibber and all that. Why wasn't he more esthetic, like John the Baptist – now there is a holy man! A person who can deny himself; but Jesus is embracing all of life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is in the creation, and he made everything. The great thing that we read – just a couple verses of Colossians 1... You know, Paul is just exuberant in that passage. If you read Colossians 1:15-23, in the Greek those are exactly two sentences. The first sentence is 230-some words, as Paul is just tripping over his own pen in saying that the whole creation – every atom, every bird, every fish, every star – it all was made by him, for im, and now it all makes sense in him. Everything, everything, everything; he keeps repeating the Greek phrase, *ta panta*, which means everything; the whole kit and caboodle, A to Z; and so, yes, when Jesus comes here to creation, no wonder his parables were all about birds and seeds and bread and all these beautiful... and flowers... Jesus made all of that, and for a while he walked among all that; so of course he appreciated creation. Both Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 make the connection between image and creation; and that how we relate to the physical creation of God has a lot to do with what it means to bear God's image, and Jesus bore it perfectly.

DAVE BAST

And everything is hanging together in him, still today. It is not just that he started it up and let it go and he is somehow distant or separate or far away. He is over everything and he is in everything and it is all kind of cohering in him. One of the ideas we really have to fight against is the idea of an absentee God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; deism.

DAVE BAST

Yes. Things continue to happen... I love a line of G. K. Chesterton: The sun gets up every morning, not because of the laws of physics, but because God says: Get up.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, do it again.

DAVE BAST

All of that is part of what it means to be the image of God; but what about us? How does this bear on us and how does it affect us; and we will ponder that more 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 talking today about yet another image for Jesus in the New Testament, but this time the image is the Image. What does it mean that Jesus is now the perfect Image of God; not just in his divine nature, but in his human nature, and how he interacted with people; how he interacted with creation; how he taught us about God. That also was the image of God in Jesus; but now, what about us? If we were created in God's image, what we did when we sinned was like we took a knife and slashed our own masterpiece.

DAVE BAST

Before we get into that, though, Scott, I want to just pause and, we have been talking a lot about the human image of God, but let's not totally overlook the fact that when it says Jesus is the Image of God or the exact representation, he is also showing us what God is like. So, we are not saying that is not part of it. If you want to know what God is really like, look at Jesus. That is the point.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We took a knife to our own masterpiece. We, each of us, were a gorgeous masterpiece of God's creative artwork; and then in sin we smeared and polluted and bleared and crushed and all of those good Gerard Manly Hopkins images, and God did not want to leave us that way and he hasn't. So, he sent Jesus as the perfect image; that is good; but now, what about us?

DAVE BAST

Well, and going further into Colossians, we get a really good pointer of how this works, and it is not just a loner kind of individualistic thing that, oh, Jesus will fix me so I can laugh and play and sing. It is very much a communal thing. Let's keep on holding that idea that the image of God is relational; and so, for example, Colossians 3, Paul begins that with a famous verse:

¹If you, then, have been raised with Christ – and that is plural you – you, the Church – have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is. And then he spells out a little bit of what that means, Colossians 3:8 and following:

⁸But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: Anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices, ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge – here it is; listen for it: in the image of its creator. ¹¹Here there is no gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, here is where creation and redemption, in Paul's theology, get clamped right together. We were made in God's image; we ruined and sullied that image; but now, the closer you get to Jesus, the closer you get back to the original creation, and then some. So, as you live into and lean into and understand your identity in Christ – you have been raised with Christ in baptism – you were crucified, raised, and now you live in Christ – and the more you do that, the more you are going to look like what God wanted you to be like in the first place. So, the image of God that came up in creation is now being put back together. The art restorers have come in through Jesus and they are putting the painting back together. They are healing the seams where the knife went, and they are carefully removing the paint that got splattered onto the masterpiece, so that it gets back to its original beauty.

DAVE BAST

Yes, okay, so...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is what Jesus is doing.

DAVE BAST

Right; but what are some of the ways this shows up in our lives?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and I think that it shows up through a lot of the things that we talked about earlier from Genesis in the first segment of this program, Dave, where we said: What was the image? And one of the things we said was: Well, one of things that being made male and female enabled was proper relationships; unity; it shows up especially in marriage, where the two become one flesh; but in a wider sense, it shows up in the church, when sisters and brothers live together in unity, Psalm 133 would riff on. We believe in a Triune God now: Father,

Son, and Holy Spirit, and among the theories of the trinity are the social Trinitarians who say: One of the ways to understand God is that you have three persons who are so in love that they are just one God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are so close that although they are distinct, there are not three gods, just one; and the analogy for the Church is: When many are one in the Church, that looks like God. Then the Church is bearing the Image of God by having good relationships: Strong marriages, strong families, and strong churches that show love.

DAVE BAST

And so many of these behaviors that Paul singles out and says: Hey, this is not part of what we are now; are antisocial. They are the way we talk about each other. They are the way we dismiss each other. They are the prejudices that we feel. They are the ways that we take advantage of each other, maybe, or prey on each other. Where we more and more are sloughing those off like dirty clothes – Paul uses that image – and putting on this new, clean thing, where we... we are genuinely caring for each other...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we reach out to others; we reach out to the marginalized...

DAVE BAST

And bring them in... bring them in, yes, absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that includes, also, the creation. We have had a lot of creation thoughts here. When we take care of other creatures, whether they are birds or fish or deer; whether we are cleaning up streams or oceans, taking care of creation is what it means to bear the image of God. We were put in charge to take care of it in the first place. Jesus showed his love of creation. So, in our church communities; how we love each other; how we enfold strangers; how we take care of the creation; how we teach God accurately; all of these ways loop us back to all of those things we said in the first segment about what it was to be created in God's image. It is all being put back together in us through Jesus.

DAVE BAST

And where that is happening, and people see it, they are drawn to that – that kind of community – that kind of life. It is like that wonderful passage in Isaiah that prophesies the time when people will stream into the City of God and they will say: God is here; God is with you here. I can see it. That is what we want our congregations, our communities, our families to look like so that we actually do reflect the image of God in Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

By grace that is where we are going. Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue to dig deeper into scripture; so feel free to visit us on groundworkonline.com, and there you will be able to give us some feedback on topics and passages you would like us to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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