

Knowing Our True Identity

DAVE BAST

No one has expressed the paradox of human nature better than Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: What a piece of work is a man; how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties; in form and moving, how express and admirable; in action, how like an angel; in apprehension, how like a god. The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals; and yet, to me what is this quintessence of dust; man delights not me.

So, what are human beings? Are they noble, admirable, godlike creatures? Yes. Are they frail, flawed, broken creatures, capable of the worst atrocities? Yes, again. The Bible explains how both these things are true; and we will look at that today on *Groundwork*. 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 we are launched into a series today, Scott, on *Groundwork*, that we are calling basic Christianity. That is actually the title of a classic book by John Stott, the late, great evangelical leader. I think it was published in 1958 originally. It is also a riff on C. S. Lewis's even more famous classic: *Mere Christianity*; because what we mean by this is that common body of belief that most Christians have held to from the beginning of the Church right through the present; Christians in different times and places; Christians in different denominations; it is that ninety percent that C. S. Lewis estimated of common core doctrine. What someone once called...or what an ancient creed once called that which is believed everywhere, always, by everyone.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and in the first program, we looked at those common things about God and the nature of God. This is the second program in this series, and if you go to seminary, you start out with a course of theology—the doctrine of God—and next is anthropology, which is the doctrine of humanity. So, who does the Bible reveal to us we human beings are; and that is what we are going to look at. It is a common question that people ask all the time. We are, at least on this planet, the only self-reflective beings that we know. Dogs don't wonder about the nature of dogs, but humans wonder about the nature of themselves; and we wonder: Well, what are people? Are they basically good? Are they born good, or are we basically evil? Are we...what are we? People ask this all the time, and of course, the Bible has an interest in helping us to answer those very basic questions.

DAVE BAST

Or are some people good, some people bad? Is it up to us to choose? You know, there is kind of a classic, cartoonish depiction of this, of somebody with a bad angel and a good angel sitting on each shoulder, or there is a demon and an angel, and: Oh, dear; which one do I listen to? Or sometimes the debate circles around nature versus nurture. When people do something bad, is that because of their nature, or is it just because they have not been educated properly or they weren't raised in the right way; it is their parents' fault, or whatever.

So, yes; these are basic questions; and we are really not interested in getting into a philosophical or speculative debate, but we want to look at what the Bible says. We say it over and over every single

Groundwork program: We dig into scripture. So, what does scripture say about human nature?

SCOTT HOEZEE

The first thing it says is that we started good. We started with the possibility of being good and staying good, because Genesis 1:27 says God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them, male and female, he created them. So, we were given a special gift of being endowed with some God-likeness; some of the attributes and traits of God got gifted to us; and that is a profoundly good thing, that we are, as we sometimes say in theology, the crown of God's creation. There are some people who think that is just arrogant, but that is how the Bible presents it, that human beings were among the animals, but elevated far above the animals by being given rationality and love and language; all of which ties in with being in the image of God, and there is a very famous psalm, Psalm 8, that talks about that.

DAVE BAST

Right; it kind of assigns human beings that mid place between the angels and the animals. Let's just listen to Psalm 8. It goes like this:

¹Lord, our Lord; how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory in the heavens. ²Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies to silence the foe and the avenger. (And then this part especially) ³When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place. ⁴What is mankind that you are mindful of them? Human beings, that you care for them?

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶You made them rulers over the works of your hands, and you put everything under their feet. ⁷All flocks and herds and animals of the wild. The birds in the sky, the fish in the sea; all that swims the paths of the sea. ⁹Lord, our Lord. How majestic is your name in all the earth.

And so, there, Dave, is sort of the answer. What are humans? Well, we are not God...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are not quite to the glory of angels, but we are far above all other creatures, and we are even given charge of this world on God's behalf. We occupy a very, very special place.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know...and this psalmist... I love this because he is so contemporary with us. He is doing something that probably we have all done. He is looking up at the night sky.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

You know, you are up in the north woods somewhere...you are on a fishing trip or you are camping, and you are away from the lights of the city; and you look up and just are staggered by the stars that stretch out, spread out to infinity; and he asks: What in the world are human beings?

SCOTT HOEZEE

How can little old...

DAVE BAST

In such a universe.

SCOTT HOEZEE

How can little old me possibly matter? And of course, today we can see so much farther into those stars with the Hubble telescope and all the rest; so we see even more than what the psalmist was able to see; and of course, there are people today who...like Carl Sagan, the famous astronomer; or even now this DeGrasse Tyson person, who is also a very famous astronomer now, who just recently did a remake of the *Cosmos* TV series... They look at all of that and say: What are human beings in the midst of all that? We are precisely nothing.

DAVE BAST

Nothing, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In all that vastness, you think you matter? You think even if there is a God, he sees you? You are deluded. We are just, you know, little dust motes occupying a little speck of dust of a planet going around a second-rate sun in a vastness we cannot conceive. So, human beings are nothing; but David turns, in Psalm 8, the psalmist there, who may be David, turns that on its head and says: Well, it kind of looks like we are nothing; but God's word reveals that we are something.

DAVE BAST

And God himself has come to establish a relationship with us: O Lord, our Lord. He is using God's covenant name there: Yahweh; our Lord, how majestic is your name; because the Creator is real and the Creator has established a covenantal relationship with these human beings, we are something. We are special; and we are only a little bit lower than the angels, the Psalmist says. He could echo what Hamlet said: How noble; how amazing. And you think of the artifacts that human ingenuity has created; the great artworks: A painting by Michelangelo; a Bach fugue; these are just breathtaking; or the technological achievements of human beings. We are great, and we do reflect the Creator's image, and he has given us a job to do, to rule over the rest of the creation—to care for it. We have talked about that on other *Groundwork* programs.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And a second thing we could say before we close out this first segment of this program is that we are also to recognize that we *all* as human beings come from this same God. God is the Father and the Creator of every single one of us. The Apostle Paul talked about that on Mars Hill in Acts 17, you know, when he is saying: ²⁶From one man he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he marked out their appointed times in history. ²⁷God did this so they would seek him, and reach out for him, and find him, though he is not far from any one of us; ²⁸for in him we live and move and have our being... And that is the unity of the human race under the one God; and a little later in this program we are going to talk about some implications of some of this, including why racism is such a sin...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To try to exclude any other person because of their skin color or language or where they grew up from the fatherhood of the one God is just wrong.

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, it was a classic statement of liberalism a hundred years ago to talk about the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man. Those terms are a little bit antiquated now; we might update them; but as Evangelicals, we recognize that there is a deeper and more profound sense in which God becomes our Father; through faith in Christ we are adopted into his family; but that does not negate the other biblical truth that as creatures every human person deserves respect. Their life should be valued. It should be protected—old or young, rich or poor, healthy, able, disabled, born or unborn. It is just a biblical implication of God the Creator, that we all have value and worth; and in fact, Scott, it is very

difficult, I think, to defend the idea of human rights if you dismiss belief in a creator.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because we are all created in the image of God; that is the good news; that is the first thing the Bible tells us; but unhappily, it is not the only thing. There is something else that happened that we ourselves did, and we are going to think about that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and this is the second of our basic Christianity series, Dave, where today we are thinking about who are we as human beings? Anthropology, the doctrine of humanity. We talked about the good news part. The Bible reveals that we are created good...

DAVE BAST

We are special, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in God's image; and God loves us and sees us, but you don't have to get very far into the Bible—actually only two chapters—to find out that something went horribly wrong; and it kind of reminds you of a debate that raged in the letters section of the newspaper of the Times of London years ago. People were wondering: Where does evil come from? What is wrong with the world? Where does this come from? The great Christian writer and preacher, G. K. Chesterton was alive at the time, so he wrote a letter to the editor and said: What is wrong with the world? And Chesterton wrote a very short letter: Sir, I am.

DAVE BAST

I am; and that is the Christian explanation. It is on us. We went astray. The story is told in Genesis 3. It is the story that we call The Fall; and that, too, is part of basic Christianity; belief that this actually happened; that our first parents, Adam and Eve, were made perfect and upright and good in every way. In fact, there is a famous statement by the great theologian, St. Augustine. He used three Latin phrases to describe where we are and where we have been and where we are headed; and the first phrase he said with respect to our first parents was: *posse non peccare*; it was possible for them not to sin. They didn't have to sin, but as the story unfolds in Genesis 3...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That also meant they could...

DAVE BAST

That also meant they could...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they did.

DAVE BAST

And they did; and in doing so, they not only turned away from God and destroyed their intimacy with him, but they left us with a broken relationship, too; and actually, a nature that we are born with that is no longer capable of not sinning.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So Augustine said: Right now, for the rest of us, our situation is: *Non posse non peccare*; we are not able not to sin.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the corruption and the original sin spread like a virus in humanity, or in modern-day terms that the Bible writers wouldn't have known about; it is sort of like our DNA strand got kinked permanently, and we are all born bent—we are all born already guilty even before we do anything—and already completely prone to sin. Babies are not, what in theology they call, *tabula rasa* (we are doing a lot of Latin in this program) *tabula rasa*...we are not born blank slates morally. It is not sort of an open question when you have a baby and say: Well, Honey; let's see. Maybe this is the one who will never sin. No. This kid is going to sin because we all do. We are already born sinners, as Paul wrote in Romans 3:

¹⁰There is no one righteous; not even one. ¹¹There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. ¹²All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good; not even one. Strong language, but that is testament to the spread of sin.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you mentioned babies, and that they are not blank slates. I think we all know this, too, if you have ever been around a child or had a child or trained a child, the one thing you do not have to teach a child is how to say: Me; mine!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You don't have to teach a child how to say: NO! You do have to teach them how to say please and thank you because of this sort of innate selfishness. So, there is a term that Christian theology has come up with to describe human nature, and the phrase is: Total depravity; which sounds pretty ominous. It sounds like Paul when he is saying there is no one who understands. Everyone is worthless. There is no one righteous. That is a little bit strong language, and it could be taken, I think, too far; as can the phrase total depravity be taken too far.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is usually misunderstood. I mean, in Reformed circles, this is one of the five points of Calvinism; but Roman Catholics and Orthodox believers believe in total depravity the same as all Christians. This is a basic Christianity point. It is very easy to understand. The adjective *total* on depravity can be taken as an intensive adjective, which means everybody is just as bad as they could possibly be. They are totally... Well, I know lots of non-Christian people of whom that is not even true. So actually, the way the *total* should be understood is in terms of scope. Every *part* of life is tinged with sin. It is like putting red food coloring in a glass of water. The whole thing turns pink. There is no clear spot left. It is not totally red, but every part is pink.

DAVE BAST

And one very practical implication of that is that our thinking is also affected by sin.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

None of us are cool and rational and perfectly able to make decisions. In fact, you know, we talked in our first program about the book of nature, and how that declares the glory of God, and you should be able to read that and see that there is a creator, but many people don't; and it is not that they are stupid, it is that their minds have become darkened, Paul says, in Romans Chapter 1, and they no longer are capable of seeing. So that is part of the effect of sin, too. It is something that clouds our thinking, that makes us incapable of totally disinterested in the sense of non-self-interest—a disinterested approach to basic questions and basic issues.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if we were just looking at the horizontal level of human existence without reference to God, we are not going to do a very good job as human beings to figure out what is right and what is wrong; what is the standard; what is the straight stick by which all crooked sticks should get measured? We are not going to come up with that because we are all in the same boat. We are all blinded by sin; we are all limited by sin. We are going to need outside help to figure out what is wrong, what is right, and how do we get to the right? That, of course, is where the Bible comes in. That is what scripture teaches us; that God reveals the standards in his Law and throughout the Bible; God reveals what being an image-bearer of God is supposed to look like, because we wouldn't be able to figure that out on our own.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and so, when Paul says...here is another point I think we need to make with respect to total depravity or our sinful nature, we might say...when Paul says there is no one who is righteous, there is no one who seeks after God; again, there are people who are relatively righteous, you know. We all know folks that we call "good people." She is a good person; he is a good guy. There are people who are searching for God in a way through other religions, maybe, or just through philosophy or through personal study; but what total depravity means is we are never going to get there on our own; and in fact, none of our good works, even, are truly and perfectly good. There is always going to be a little bit of ego. So, let's think about the implications of that, or sort of practical implications, for the way we live our lives as flawed creatures in a fallen world; and we will do that next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this program on the nature of humanity where, Dave, we have said two things the Bible teaches: One, we were created good and noble and in the image of God, but then we messed that up with our sin; and sin has spread throughout the human race so that now we are not able to do the good without some outside help; and that is one of the main implications of that core teaching of scripture that we were created good but we fell into sin; and that is, we are in serious need of a savior.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely. Fact number one: We need to be saved, and we cannot save ourselves. If there is one thing that Christianity is not, it is not a self-help religion. You shouldn't find the Bible in the self-help section of your local bookstore. You know, there is nothing wrong with trying to fix yourself a little bit, but we just said even our best works are not purely good. In God's eyes, nothing we do lifts us to the level where we deserve to be saved.

We talked about total depravity, and I read a wonderful little story about Dallas Willard, the late Christian philosopher, who has written a number of wonderful books on the spiritual life; and he was memorialized in the pages of *Christianity Today* by a Christian pastor named John Ortberg; and he told the story of how Willard was asked if he believed in total depravity, and he replied: Well, I believe in *sufficient* depravity. And someone said: What do you mean by that? And he said: We are sufficiently depraved, that when we get to heaven nobody will be able to say: I merited this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I deserved it; I earned it. No, we need to be saved.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even fallen, unredeemed people are capable of some good—of some civic good—maybe of some artistic good; but we are not capable of saving good. There is only one who can do that, and that is Jesus Christ, who came as the perfect human being, who lived a perfect life, and still died under the curse of sin in our place, so that salvation is completely by grace alone; but the good news is that once that happens, then we are saved; and then we are also renewed by the Holy Spirit so that we can start to get back to that image of God, renewed now in Jesus Christ, who the New Testament says Jesus is the express image of God, par excellence. The more we gain conformity to Jesus, the more we get back to what we were created to be in the first place.

DAVE BAST

Well, here is a second implication of our fallen human nature: Even when we are saved, and we are saved by grace through faith, as you were saying, Scott; we still need saving. It is not a finished process. The job isn't complete; and because that is so, our fallenness still clings to us. It is what the New Testament calls our old nature, or our sinful flesh is the word that Paul often uses—the flesh; and what that means in practical terms is, we should be a little bit cautious about claiming merit of our own, or even in our thinking about ourselves, recognizing that we do have a bias toward selfishness, and that has to be taken into account. We are not purely rational beings. We are not like Spock from Vulcan in *Star Trek*, you know, who was supposedly nothing but reason and logic. There is still that fallenness that affects our thinking.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In theology we talk about justification and sanctification. Justification is a once-for-all event. You can identify with Jesus; you get baptized; your sins are forgiven: Boom; done! Sanctification is a process. While we still live on this earth, we are still facing temptations. We are still not fully there. I don't know any Christian who has ever said: I am just as good as Jesus now. Nobody this side of heaven can claim that. So, it is a process; but the good news is, it is a process that the Holy Spirit is enabling. We have hope that the Spirit helps us to do good and helps us to bear fruit and helps us to get more like Jesus, hopefully day by day.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and here is one more thing that I like to remember or try to remember in my day-to-day relationships with other people: We are all flawed. We are all fallen. God isn't finished with me yet, but he isn't finished with you either; and one of the things that we tend to do is give ourselves the benefit of the doubt: Well, I did that because I lost my temper, and I lost my temper because I had a bad night's sleep last night, and so on and so forth; but we rarely extend that to others: Well, you did that because you are a bad person; because you are lying or you...you know. Maybe we should all recognize that we are unfinished products; that we are a mixture—we are capable of some good, but we are also self centered and we need to give each other the benefit of the doubt.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right. God is not finished with me yet, as the tee-shirt often says. So, those are some basic ideas on who we are as human beings.

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always want to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into the scriptures. So visit our website. It is groundworkonline.com, and you can suggest topics and passages for future programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/knowing-our-true-identity>

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