

Questions and Concerns about Faith

DAVE BAST

We've heard from you, and you have told us that your faith is important to you. Throughout the year, you have shared with us your desire to grow in faith and have a deeper relationship with God, your concerns about growing stagnant or slipping up, and giving in to past temptations. Well, we have heard, and today we are going to dig into scripture to answer some of your questions and concerns about personal faith; both your own and that of those you love. 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Dave, as you just said in the introduction here, this is something we do—a couple per year here on the *Groundwork* program—where we take listener questions. Throughout the year, we hear from our listeners; both people who listen to us on the radio, and online, and in podcasts. You interact with us through...as we ask you to do at the end of every episode, let us know what you are thinking about. So, on Facebook and in e-mails and sometimes in just regular, good old fashioned letters, listeners have been sending in questions; and in this program, we want to tackle some of those. We have kind of taken the questions and kind of clustered them together so that we kind of have a common theme.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; you know, I think many listeners...if they think about *Groundwork*...perhaps think it is just a two-man show; but there is actually a whole team of people from ReFrame Media and Words of Hope that work on this wonderful project, and that do social media and promote interaction with listeners. So, yes; and they even send out surveys from time to time to our e-mail subscription list to ask for their comments, feedback, questions, and concerns; and so, today the first of two programs where we really want to respond to a lot of questions that had to do with the issue of faith: Where does it come from? How do I build up mine? How do I pass it on to my children? A lot of concerns around that very important subject.

SCOTT HOEZEE

How do I grow my faith? How do I feel the Lord's presence? How do we pass on the faith? That will be important in the next program. So, we want to talk about faith, and since this program is going to be about faith, and ultimately about growing in faith and keeping yourself from slipping in the faith, it would probably be a good idea, Dave, here right in this first part of the program, to define faith. What is it we are talking about? Because, as we will see, there are kind of a couple different levels to faith, even in sort of the classic Reformed document, the Heidelberg Catechism, when it says: What is true faith? It kind of gives a bi-level answer. It says: Well, faith is a sure and certain knowledge that everything that is revealed in scripture is true; but it is also a deep-rooted assurance...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That not only other people's sins are forgiven, but mine as well. So, faith has at least those components: Knowledge...so, sort of like head knowledge...and heart...assurance of salvation.

DAVE BAST

Or trust, we might say; so, there is...in more modern terms...in 21st Century terms...we might talk about faith's existential component; the fact that it really engages us—it engages our whole person; and sometimes when we speak about our hearts, that is what we are really talking about, as opposed to just our heads or our intellect. There have been many wonderful kind of illustrations of this. It is the difference between observing a chair and actually sitting in it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And trusting yourself to it. The Bible also has some wonderful definitions of faith. I think immediately of Hebrews 11:1: Faith is the substance of what we hope for and the assurance of things we cannot see...or don't see. So, it is a kind of a conviction that we have...that unseen reality, and supremely, the God whom we cannot see is nevertheless real and true, and we can trust ourselves to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even Jesus, in John 17, sort of in his prayer the night in which he was betrayed: ³“This is eternal life,” Jesus said, “That they know you, the only true God; and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” So, we know God, we know Jesus, we know who they are; we believe Jesus is God's Son sent into the world; and we therefore have confidence and trust. One thing I think we definitely want to point out, Dave, what we don't want to slip into is the idea that faith is something we create, or that we generate on our own, and then we have to kind of keep it percolating on our own. Faith is the first gift God gives us. So, it is sort of like faith is a bucket that God gives us, into which he pours the waters of baptism—he pours out his grace; or another image: Faith is sort of like an electrical wire that he hooks into our hearts and into our heads, and the power of the Holy Spirit then flows into us; but you have to get faith from God first, and it is sheerly a gift. It is not something we earn, and it is certainly not something we create or generate on our own.

DAVE BAST

I think one way that we can go wrong is in asking the question: Well, how can I have more faith? How can I increase my faith? Well, you just have to believe harder...just try harder. It always makes me think of the scene in *Peter Pan*. I remember going to a stage version of *Peter Pan* when our kids were little where Tinker Bell seems to die, and then Peter turns to the audience and says: Do you believe? Believe harder! Believe harder! Then Tinker Bell suddenly comes back alive. That is not what biblical faith is. As you say, Scott, biblical faith is a gift: By grace you have been saved through faith; not of yourselves lest anyone should boast, Paul says in Ephesians 2. You were dead in trespasses and sins. So, no more can a corpse choose to believe than we could at first, but God gives us, as this first gift of grace, as you pointed out, Scott, the ability to respond, to say yes, to receive. So that is essentially what faith is; and if you ask: Where does it come from? How do we get that? How can I have more of it? Well, there is some pretty simple advice in scripture as well, like Romans 10: ¹⁷Faith comes by hearing...hearing the Word of Christ. So, if you want to believe...if you want to have faith...then you have to go where the Gospel is being proclaimed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And even that ability to believe what you hear is also a gift. God...it sort of reminds you of Acts 16, where we hear about Lydia. She is listening to the apostles. ¹⁴One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to

respond to Paul's message.
So, there it is...

DAVE BAST

Yes, there it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul is preaching, but she doesn't decide to believe what Paul says. The Lord opens her heart. On the outside, it looks like *I* have decided to follow Jesus, as an old song says. Behind the scenes, though, God is the one kind of opening the door to your heart so the message can flow in. It is a gift, *but...* You know, we also know that once you get that gift, there is another sense of faith in terms of sanctification—growth in faith, which we are also going to be talking about in the next segment. So, although it is a gift, you are not just supposed to put it up on the shelf and admire it. It is to become a part of your living being...it is to become part of your walk of discipleship; and in that sense, we can grow in our faith; we can grow in our knowledge of scripture, and some things we will talk about more in the next segment.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and you know, one last thing before we leave this question of what faith is and where it comes from, I think it is important for us to at least touch on one of the great fundamental truths of the Gospel, and that is that we are made right with God through faith. It is entrusting ourselves to him, believing in him, and accepting his Word, his promises that we are saved, essentially.

So, Paul talks about this in a significant passage from Romans Chapter 3, where he says that:

²³All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴and all are justified freely by his grace (There is grace again.) Through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood, to be received by faith.

That is the Gospel in a nutshell. I mean, it is one of my favorite texts in all the Bible, because it says: Yes, it is God's grace that does this for us. Even faith is a gift; but as we are given faith, we lay hold on Christ; we believe what he did on the cross; our sins are forgiven, and we are made right with God again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And once we have that relationship with God, as with all relationships that we have...when we love someone, whether it is a spouse or a child or a friend, you want that relationship to deepen and to grow; and so, in just a moment we are going to continue this conversation about faith by talking about our desire to grow in the faith, and what the Bible says about it, and things that we can do...practices in our lives that will deepen and enhance our faith and the relationship with God it makes possible. So, stay tuned.

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 Dave, again in this program we are doing listener questions about faith. So, we just talked about faith as primarily a gift of grace, and yet, something that you can deepen; and some of you have written to us some of your concerns about whether or not that faith is deepening. What about people who don't regularly fellowship with fellow believers? Is that a problem? Am I the best Christian I can be? Am I serving God to the fullest? So, this thing of faith is a gift, but are there things we can do to deepen it; or are there things we can refrain from doing that will kind of keep it static? So, we want to talk a little bit about growing in your faith.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and we already touched on one very fundamental issue, and that is exposure to God's Word. I quoted from Romans 10: Faith comes by hearing, hearing the Word of Christ; and that is in a passage where

Paul is really talking about the mechanics of the Gospel. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, he says, quoting from the Old Testament; but how can they call on someone if they have not heard? How can they hear if they don't believe? If they don't hear...if they don't have someone share with them or preach to them. So, he lays it out stage by stage; and yes, you need to believe in order to call; but in order to believe, you need knowledge, you need witness, you need the testimony that comes from God's Word, through the power and operation of the Holy Spirit. That is where the gift part of it comes in again. It is the Holy Spirit who uses this means to open our minds and hearts to faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and as we said at the end of the last segment, Dave, when you...faith gives us this wonderful relationship with God and with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit...with the triune God...but, just like if you fall in love with someone and you get married, once you get married you don't say to your spouse: Okay, I am done being interested in you now. I really don't want to learn anything more about you—your history. I mean, we love each other, we got married; so, that is it. We don't have to talk any more; we don't have to share more from our history. No! You say: I am totally interested in you. I would love to hear more stories from your childhood. I would like to get to know your family better. And we say that with God; and how do we do that? Well, I think you touched on something, too, Dave. Bible study has traditionally been a key way to deepen. So, we said in the first segment that faith is both knowledge and assurance; and on the knowledge part, the Word of God is endlessly rich. We will never...nobody has ever finished mining the riches of scripture. So, we study scripture. I am reminded, too, Dave, that if you read Luke 24 and the resurrection story of Jesus in Luke, and then there is the road to Emmaus story, and what happens on the road to Emmaus? Jesus engages in Bible study. He opens their minds to show them all scripture was witnessing to him all along; and then when he disappears and then reappears in Jerusalem at the end of Luke 24, what happens? This is Easter Sunday, keep in mind...this is still the day of the resurrection. Another Bible study! Jesus teaches them, and they are sitting at his feet, and he is opening scripture. That happened on the day of Easter, so it is probably a fair bet it is still important for us, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; you know, this isn't rocket science, to use perhaps a hackneyed phrase. It is exposing yourself to scripture, either alone in personal devotions; in a small group Bible study...those are very enriching; in public worship.

So, there is a verse from Hebrews Chapter 10 that says:

²⁴Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good works; ²⁵not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

So, yes; go where there are other Christians. Go to public worship. Older generations used to speak, Scott, about the means of grace, and we kind of grew up with that phrase: The means of grace, which are the Bible, preaching. Paul says in 1 Corinthians Chapter 1 in a famous verse:

²¹Since in the wisdom of God the world, through its own wisdom, did not know him; God was pleased through the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe.

It seems like such a dumb thing: a person getting up and just sharing a message—telling a story about a guy who died on a cross; and yet, this is the way God has chosen to bring faith to people, and the way that he works. So, just do those things, and use the means of grace and see what happens.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And preaching doesn't usually happen just one on one. It is preaching to a congregation, right? You preach to a bunch of people at once: ten, twenty, a hundred, a thousand—it doesn't matter; but, there is sometime important about that fellowship of believers. You just read the text from Hebrews 10. Don't neglect meeting together, the author of Hebrews says, because there is some synergy; there is some iron sharpening iron that happens when we gather together for public worship; and that is so, so important; and it is maybe why, Dave, in, you know, sort of atheistic regimes...government regimes all through history, what is one of the first things they try to outlaw? Worship services. They don't want people to get together for worship, because even they recognize there is power in believers who have fellowship together, and who learn together, and who hear preaching together.

So, how do we grow in our faith? Well, Bible study—personally and in groups; worship—singing the hymns that form the faith; hearing the sermons; talking about the sermon and the worship and the hymns afterwards together. These all help us to grow.

DAVE BAST

You know, Scott, there is a common old illustration about this, of a person who was watching a fire burning merrily in a fireplace, and then took a shovel and took one coal out of the middle of the fire and set it aside on the hearth; and pretty soon that coal was dead and cold. We continue to burn when we are together—when we are experiencing that—and sharpening one another...encouraging one another, as the text says in Hebrews. So, yes; these are all ways in order to build and grow our faith, and they are really pretty simple and straightforward, but there is another way that will help our faith to grow—I should say perhaps *can* help our faith to grow—and it is not quite as pleasant...it is not quite as enjoyable to think about, but that is the subject of suffering. It is true, in fact, that often God uses difficulties and trials and hard experiences in order to grow our faith, perhaps when we become complacent.

That is the last thing we want to talk about as we turn to the final segment in this program, because that is another issue that some of you have raised: What about my faith when I am going through hard times or personal struggles?

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and today this program where we are digging into scripture to answer listener questions—questions that you have shared with us. These all are questions that center on faith. What is faith? How can we grow in faith; and Dave, we were just saying in the last segment that we grow faith through Bible study, through corporate worship, through preaching, through counseling when we have times of suffering; that our faith can be refined as by fire, the Bible says. It is not pleasant, but our faith can deepen, and sometimes we do need counseling. All of these things are so important, Dave, because one of the things that we know...and C. S. Lewis talked about this, too. He said: How many people actually get argued out of their faith? Don't most just drift away? They just sort of start neglecting it. It reminds you of Hebrews 2: ¹We must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard so we do not drift away...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But sometimes we go through seasons where we feel like we or a loved one are drifting away, and that is kind of what we want to talk about as we close this program.

DAVE BAST

Yes; especially if life has become a burden or a struggle, or it has beaten us down in some way. It is hard to go to church, you know, if you are grieving or if you are in deep depression. So, we had a number of comments that pointed to this issue. So, someone wrote us: I have concern over not being victorious over a nagging sin addiction. Another person: I grew up in church, but made some wrong choices. I left that life. I joined a ministry group, but deep down I feel like I am still running, like I am just playing a role. I have been trying to live the right way, but things keep going downhill. So the biggest issue I have with my faith is trying to keep it. And another person: I am not growing. I keep backsliding. So, this is kind of a common refrain; and maybe the first thing to say is, if you are experiencing this, you are not alone, friend.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I mean, we all can identify with that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Obviously, if the direction of our faith is singularly downhill...if you are just sort of becoming spiritually kind of atrophied, like getting out of shape physically, that is a problem; but we shouldn't be the least bit surprised, or even troubled...and maybe this is a word to say to some of the people who made the comments you just read, Dave...we shouldn't be surprised that faith does have its ups and downs, right? We are going to have peaks and valleys. You see that in the life of almost every single character in the Bible. The Apostle Peter, Moses, Abraham, David...you can just go right on down the line. They had moments of great spiritual triumph and insight, and moments of bad sins, terrible mistakes...told lies, had an adulterous affair...whatever it might be. The path of faith is zig-zaggy. We should expect that; and just because you have a season where you feel a little dry, it doesn't mean you are lost. You don't want that to go on forever, but it doesn't mean you are lost. So, there is a little bit of an assuring word to speak there, as well.

DAVE BAST

You know, Paul...again, I keep coming back to Romans, but it is really the manifesto of the Gospel. It is the richest exposition of not only the basic content, as we saw at the beginning of this program about justification by faith, but about the life of faith, too; and the struggle with sin. So, in Romans 7 Paul frankly admits that he doesn't do what he wants to do, and he finds himself falling back and doing the thing he doesn't want to do, even though he loves God's Law in his *heart*, he says:

^{24b}Who will deliver me from this body of sin? (and then immediately) ²⁵Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ.

So, I think we hang on to the truth that in the end we are going to win. It is going to be okay. God's got us, he's with us. In the previous chapter—in Romans Chapter 6, Paul writes some wonderful things that I think we can kind of turn to again and again.

⁸If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him... ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹²So do not let sin reign in your body so that you obey it. Do not offer yourself to sin... ^{13b}but rather, offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life... ¹⁴For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

I think when I fall back again, or backslide, or stumble or fail, or go back to the old sin that I have been doing all my life and keep confessing, and keep going back to it, I just have to remind myself where I am. I am not under law, I am under grace. I have been saved by grace; I have died with Christ, and come alive. I need to offer myself again to God. I often think of Peter, you know: Where else shall we go, Lord? You have the words of eternal life. I've got nowhere else to go, so if I've sinned and failed, I just want to turn back again to him and re-offer myself and start again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and that baptismal identity is so important, Dave. It is going to come up in the next program, too, when we talk about struggles of our children and youth; but Paul so often in his letters...particularly to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians...he so often sort of has to remind them of who they are. They kind of forget who they are. They backslide, they sin, and he says: Just remember who you are. You have union with Christ. You were made a new person through your baptism. You died with Christ; you were raised with Christ, as we were just reading, so just remember that; and I think that is important. When we feel like we are struggling, or going backwards in our faith, remember who you are, and you can still come to God in prayer, as his child. Nothing can change that. You have been washed in baptism; so, though you may be ashamed, though you may be worried, when you come to God in prayer and say: Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The classic line...I want to grow more, Lord. The Lord is not going to turn away anybody of his children who have that baptismal identity. Of course, he is going to come to you through his Holy Spirit, and maybe set you back on a path of further growth, even after a season of some dryness or some struggle.

DAVE BAST

See, the basic issue for all of us is really the same. Sin has been defeated. Jesus broke its back on the cross. He defeated evil. He defeated the devil and the power of sin; but sin is still present with us; and God in his wisdom has not yet seen fit to deliver us completely from its presence. So, its power is broken but its presence is real, and that is the dilemma we live with. We often talk about the already and the not yet of our faith, but thanks be to God, the victory will be ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. We hope you will join us again next time as we dig into scripture to answer some more concerns about nurturing the faith of our children, encouraging the faith of family members, and what to do about family members who don't believe.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com. Share what *Groundwork* means to you, and as we have been doing on this program, tell us questions and topics you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

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