
Trust God's Providence

SCOTT HOEZEE

On any given day, some Christians are forced to confront hard questions. Mostly, they are the hard questions that pop into our minds when something bad happens to a loved one. Why didn't God prevent my dad from getting cancer? Once in a while, much larger groups ask such questions, after a tornado devastates a town, or after a terrorist attack like 9/11 devastates a nation; but in the year 2020, the whole world asked these questions, because the whole world had to deal with a pandemic; the appearance of the novel coronavirus now known as COVID-19. Where is God in all that we have experienced these last eight months? Today on *Groundwork*, we will wonder about the providence of God in a time of pandemic. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *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, this is now the second of four programs we are doing on a very special, very specific series related to the events of 2020; chiefly, the COVID-19 global pandemic, but also racial unrest and all the things that happened, particularly in the United States in the spring and early summer of 2020.

So, we want to bring our faith into contact and dig into scripture to think about these things. We thought about lament in the first program; now, we are going to think about providence, something we have thought about a lot on *Groundwork*, actually.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; we did a lengthy series on the Apostles' Creed, and that begins with "I believe in God, the Father, Almighty; creator of heaven and earth." It is right there, the idea of providence or God's sovereignty or his oversight, we might say, in the world. He didn't just create the world and start it like a machine and then walk out of the room and left it to run on its own. Christians have always believed that God is intimately involved in what goes on in the world, and to some degree, actively behind it. Those are really the questions that are raised when something bad happens...something really terrible, and something widespread like the pandemic that we have been experiencing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; so we are not what you just described, Dave, of God sort of starting the machine of creation up and then walking away and letting it run on its own. That is called deism. That is an early, early heresy of the Church...the idea that God is not involved...he's not paying attention, he is just letting...he wound up the clock at the beginning of time and he is just letting it tick down while he does something else. Nope; we believe God is much, much closer than that; in fact, you see that reflected a lot in scripture, and particularly in the Psalms. So, here are some words from Psalm 104:

²⁷All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. ²⁸When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. ²⁹When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. ³⁰When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.

DAVE BAST

Actually, you can hear that word in the word *providence*: Provide. The psalmist says God provides life, and he also takes life away; when he withholds the breath of any creature, then they die. In that sense, God is intimately involved, not just with human life, but with all life...with animals and plants, everything in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, of course, there is some poetic hyperbole...a little exaggeration going on here, but the idea behind the hyperbole...the idea behind the exaggeration is theologically just right. God has not stepped away from his creation. God has remained intimately involved with all life, and that has been a core belief of Jews, the Israelites of old, and Christians all along.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, yes; the idea that we are dependent on God, and God cares for us, and God watches over us, and God foresees...that is also in the word providence...to see ahead...*provideo* in the Latin root of that word; and that is a lesson, really, that Israel had to learn in the wilderness...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Those forty years of wandering. So, here is a wonderful passage from the book of Deuteronomy Chapter 8 that talks about this very thing.

³He (God, or the Lord) humbled you (says Moses). He caused you to hunger and then fed you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. ⁶Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him. ⁷For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks and streams, deep springs gushing out into the valleys... ⁸a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees... ⁹a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing... ¹⁰When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God... [Otherwise] ¹⁷you may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” ¹⁸But remember the Lord your God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is. So, this is Moses' farewell sermon to the Israelites, the new generation that has come out of forty years of wandering. They are about to enter the Promised Land at last; and so, Moses is saying here: Look, it wasn't too hard to remember God in the desert, was it? If he didn't send down quail from the skies or give you that miracle manna every day, you were dead; but it is going to change now. You are going to bake your own bread; you are going to draw water up out of your own wells and cisterns. Now it is going to be easy to forget God and say: Look what I did?! So, the trick of living in good times is to learn the lessons of the scarce times, and to remember that everything comes from God. So, that is a key issue of the faith: To remember that the Lord our God provides...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that, even though he provides sometimes through us and through what we do. It is still God behind every loaf of bread you buy and every gallon of milk you buy. The Lord God provided the farmers and the bakers, and it is ultimately all the Lord.

DAVE BAST

Right; and, ultimately we are dependent on him. So, I think we made this point in the first program in this series about when our calendars are emptied, and everything we have been counting on is stripped away from us, and maybe we cannot even go to work; and one thing follows after another...they all sort of tumble down on us. Perhaps one thing we could say that could be good that comes out of that is a reminder of how much really we depend on God, that we are not ultimately in control. We don't have it all figured out, and have no need for him. No. Providence is just as real, and it is only the testing times, maybe, or the scarce times that remind us of this, like the wilderness experience...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly...

DAVE BAST

Of the people of Israel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is good news; but of course, there is a flip side, Dave, that we are going to want to talk about in just a moment, and that is this: If God is in charge...if God is not absent from this world, but intimately involved...well then, where is God when bad things happen? Where is God when a pandemic like COVID-19 comes around? Where is God when the bottom drops out of our lives? If he is here and he is providing, then why didn't he provide to not let this virus get away from us, and take hundreds of thousands of lives, and affect millions and millions of people? Why not, God? Those are the hard questions of providence, and we will take those up in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the idea of the providence of God; and really the question: Where is God in all of this stuff that has been happening this year, in the pandemic, and the unrest in our societies? In the first program of this series, we talked our response...our reaction, which is lament and ultimately trust, but also here we want to ask some of the hard questions. So, we have been talking about the idea of providence as God caring for us like he cared for Israel during the wilderness years; and we quoted from Deuteronomy. There is another passage in Deuteronomy where God says: You know, all those years your shoes didn't wear out, your clothes didn't wear out; I fed you, I cared for you; and that is a wonderful and comforting idea. God cares for us; he gives us what we need; but then, something bad happens and we raise the harder questions, don't we? If providence is real, what is going on now?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and there are two kinds of questions...two scenarios...and you will find a divergence of opinion among some Christians as to which of these two is true, or is more true. One, assuming that God has the power to have prevented COVID-19, then why didn't he? It is sort of the classic problem of evil, in a way, right? If God is all good, he would *want* to prevent something; if he is all-powerful, he *could* prevent something. Something bad happened, so what? Is God neither good nor powerful, or one and not the other? So, if God could have prevented the pandemic, why didn't he? Or, a second way of looking at it is saying: Well, maybe we don't need to see God as actively...actively behind every single thing that happens. Maybe in a fallen world, and a world where God gave free will...maybe things do happen that even God doesn't really want. Not ultimately, right? So, God doesn't have to plan every bad thing that happens and actively execute it; and that is the view also of some Christians; and of course, this is where Romans 8:28 sometimes gets invoked:

²⁸We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

So, some Christians read that and say: Yeah, God works for the good *in* all things, but that doesn't mean God creates all the things in which he works for the good. So, which is it? Did God have to plan and execute COVID-19, or could it just be something that happened that God could have prevented but didn't for reasons we are not going to know why?

DAVE BAST

We could sharpen it a little bit more, even, maybe to put a fine point on it: Did God send the pandemic? Did God send that to the world, and is he sending it for a purpose; and if so, what is that purpose?

DAVE BAST

And there are those would say, unhesitatingly, yes to the first question, that God sent it; and very often, these same people would say, and here's why...I happen to know why; and I think, Scott, that both of us would want to be a little more hesitant, especially in the second part of that, that we can almost certainly discern or divine the will of God in some specific event; because scripture pretty clearly warns us off taking that approach, as if we can know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; now, it is not as though God sometimes isn't behind even events that we regard as negative; and that certainly was true of ancient Israel. They were his covenant people, and when they let God down, God did allow some things to happen. So, you think of a passage like Jeremiah 19:

This is what the Lord says, "Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests ²and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you, ³and say, 'Hear the Word of the Lord, you kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says: Listen! I am going to bring disaster on this place [a disaster] that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle.'"

DAVE BAST

Yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, God can be behind negative things...

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; I mean, if I am remembering correctly, didn't he smash the pot then, and say: This is what I am going to do to you, Israel...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So, Jeremiah...he is sometimes called the weeping prophet because his sad job was to announce: It's too late. We are finished. God is going to really overthrow the nation, and he is going to destroy Jerusalem; and Isaiah says the same thing. There is a famous verse in the latter part of Isaiah, where God says: I am the Lord; I bring blessing and I send disaster. So, it says that he does it, but, most Christians...most believers...most biblical scholars—theologians...call them what you want, have said we have to kind of differentiate between what God truly wills and maybe what he allows; that is sometimes the language that we use. It is not totally satisfactory. There is no real good, clear-cut way of saying this, but it is a yes, but sort of thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, did God send the Babylonians to punish Judah for their covenant unfaithfulness? Yes; but that doesn't mean we can leap from there to say that means *every* time something bad happens in the world, God directly willed it and sent it. In fact, in a blog that I wrote in connection with COVID-19 for *Groundwork* this year, I pointed out that in the New Testament even when people tried to make a too-easy connection between event

X and the will of God, they were wrong. The man born blind: Hey, somebody must have sinned, Jesus, to make this guy born this way. Who did it? Jesus said: Nobody. Or once there was this tower in Siloam that fell. It was an architectural collapse. It fell on a whole bunch of people and killed them; and so, the disciples said: So, God was punishing those people. He put those people underneath that tower at that exact moment so he could wipe them out, huh? And Jesus said: No. They were no better or worse than anybody else. These things just happen sometimes, Jesus is saying. Don't make too simple of a connection. God doesn't have to be behind...and *isn't* often behind every bad thing that happens.

DAVE BAST

Now, if we push that too far, it can turn kind of scary for us...the idea that the world is out of control, then; that God couldn't stop that thing, or God wasn't with me; or God didn't care for me when such and such a thing happened? And that is a scary thought for a lot of Christians; but on the other hand, to push too far the other way, and say: Oh, God...yeah, he sends evil, he does bad things...no, no, no, we must never malign the goodness of God or the good character of God as though he delights in evil...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

There is a mystery here; we are wrestling with it; and we have to acknowledge, I think, both sides: Yes, he cares for us; yes, our lives haven't spun out of control...we haven't somehow slipped through his fingers; but no, God does not do evil; he does not will these terrible things...not directly...that is not his heart.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; God doesn't help bank robbers pull triggers of guns that kill clerks. God doesn't plop drunk drivers behind a steering wheel and then let them run over a three-year-old little girl. God *can* intervene, and we believe he does intervene. We don't know how often, because when he intervenes, bad things don't happen, and you cannot talk about what didn't happen. So, we believe he *can* intervene, we believe he *does* intervene, but we also believe that for some mysterious reason he cannot *always* intervene. So, God doesn't have to have sent COVID-19, and God doesn't need to have *willed* that it happened either. God is in charge in and through it all; in all things he can work for good; he is not derailed by these things; his kingdom is still coming; God is still in charge, but that is different than saying: Oh, yeah; God did this. He executed this pandemic; and as you said, then a lot of people make the next step: And here is why!

DAVE BAST

Yes: God gave me cancer! No, we don't...we don't go that far; at least, I would not go that far. All of this has been a little bit theoretical...a little bit theological. We cannot help that. If you think deeply about the things of faith, you are going to face these questions; but there are some practical responses we can make, and that is where we want to go next as we wrap up this program.

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

So again, we are talking about providence, and we can just ask the big question just right up front: Where has God been in COVID-19? Where was God in the pandemic? And we can say the easy part first, Dave. He has been with us...he has been close to the brokenhearted, as scripture says...he has been with those who have lost loved ones, who have *almost* lost loved ones and have endured some very long days and nights of deep,

deep worry and a lot of tears. There has been a lot of sorrow in our society and in our world with people dying, with the racial unrest. A lot of people I know, including myself, have cried more in the last eight months than usual, and God has been there with us.

DAVE BAST

Yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is what providence means; he has been close to us.

DAVE BAST

And he has reminded us of that in some wonderful ways. I think of an account that I read written by a friend who really had a terrible case of the virus, and thought he wasn't going to make it. He was having oxygen delivered to his home, and one day the delivery person who was all suited up and protected and everything, as he was walking out happened to see a Bible, and he said to my friend: Is that yours? My friend said yes. Do you read it? He said yes. The delivery man said: You are going to be okay. And that was a word from the Lord. He said it just lifted my spirits. I felt God was with me; and it was true. He saw him through. So, here is a wonderful text, for example, Scott, that you just mentioned of God being a friend to the fatherless from Psalm 68.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling. ⁶God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing... ¹⁹Praise be to the Lord, to God our savior, who daily bears our burdens. ^{20a}Our God is a God who saves.

So indeed, God is close to us when we are in sorrow; but then, what about the more complicated questions: Is God responsible for COVID-19? A student in one of my classes this spring...right before we locked down and sent all the students home for the rest of the semester...we did everything online after that, of course...but one of my students from Asia said that there was a rumor early on, as the virus was starting to spread, there was a suggestion that God sent the virus to Wuhan to punish China for persecuting the Church. So, there again, Dave, somebody says: Oh, a bad thing happened and I know why. God planned it to punish, you know, the Chinese government; but we cannot say things like that. We don't know that; and anyway, since the thing didn't stay in China for long, that theory doesn't make a lot of sense anyway...

DAVE BAST

Right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, we have to tread lightly. We all want to explain things. We would all like to be able to assign a reason; but we are just not in the position to know *if* there is a reason, much less what it is.

DAVE BAST

One of the ways I think scripture helps us get at this idea that it is more complicated than a straight A to B to C; God sent it for this reason; therefore, the other. One of the ways scripture helps us to avoid that is to remind us that there can be multiple factors playing into the same event. So, you have the story of Joseph, where Joseph finally says to his brothers: You know that whole business where you sold me into slavery? You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. That is what Romans 8 is really getting at, that God can take the evil things that aren't his best wishes for a person or for the world...it is not what he most deeply wants...somehow it happens...he permits it, or whatever language we want to use. Luther said that God does some things with his left hand, not with his right hand.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

But he can work good out of it...he can make good come from it; and we can believe that, I think, in the case of this upheaval; and especially you think about the racial tension and the unrest, God may bring good out of that. Pray God that he does, if we actually do some things to change the injustices of our society and of the system, and in our own hearts perhaps. We will talk more about that in another program.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What we often want to know is what is God saying? Is God sending us a message in all of this? Again, in a blog associated with *Groundwork* that was published this spring in terms of where is God in COVID-19, one of the things that we said there was that, yes, God is sending a message—you bet God is sending a message. He is always sending a message, and it is the Gospel. It is not the message of I [God] am punishing certain people. No; it is the good news that Jesus took the punishment for all sin for us. He bore our iniquities. He bore the burden; and so, there is salvation available. Turn to him. Repent and salvation is available to all who come to God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the message we want to talk about.

DAVE BAST

And that is the message Jesus said. I mean, you talk about that incident; it is in Luke 13, where the tower falls, and Jesus says: No; they weren't being punished; but he adds this: Unless you repent, you too will perish. Look, the message God is sending...the message Jesus is saying is life is precarious. None of us is going to live forever. We may not succumb to the pandemic, but we are going to succumb to something, and now is the time to turn to the Lord...to cast ourselves upon him...to put our trust in him; all this stuff that we have been talking about...do it, you know. That is the message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And when the pandemic started, an actor named John Krasinski...he used to play Jim on *The Office* for people who ever watched that show...he started an online show called *Some Good News*; and the idea was even during the pandemic and the lockdown, there is still some good news out there, and he would highlight these feel-good stories and creative ways in which people were managing the quarantine. Remember, even when times are hard...this was his tagline...there is always some good news. Well, guess what? The Church doesn't have *some* good news, we have *the* good news that in Jesus Christ, even in a time of pandemic, God is with us. That is the good news. That is what we proclaim.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we reflect on how the events of 2020 have impacted our communal worship, and how the Bible informs our faith-filled response.

You can connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, to share what *Groundwork* means to you; or tell us what you would like to hear us talk about on *Groundwork*.

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