
When Discipleship Growth Stalls

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have all heard the phrases: Two steps forward, one step back; or: One step forward, two steps back. We resonate with these lines because we all know that that is how it goes pretty often in life. You make some progress toward a goal, but then something comes along and you go backward a little, or a lot. Mistakes we make, obstacles we encounter, setbacks we experience, it can all make the lines of our lives more of a zigzag than a straight line of progress. Growth in discipleship can be like that, too; and today on *Groundwork*, we will explore just that. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, this is now the third episode in a four-part series we are doing on growth in discipleship. We began this series considering kind of what it means to drink spiritual milk...kind of we are in the infancy stage with Jesus. On the second program, we talked about the need to mature...to move from spiritual milk to spiritual meat, and what that means; but now, today Darrell, we want to think about setbacks that can occur, that actually cause us to go backwards.

DARRELL DELANEY

Ah, yes; setbacks. So, for anybody who thinks that walking with Jesus is a straight line up on to glory, I am sad to disappoint you, but it is not that way. There are mountain highs and valley lows; topsy turvy sometimes; and when you are walking with Jesus, you sometimes lose your way; and it is important for us to know that God knows that that process is part of it, and we need to make sure that we normalize that so people don't feel like, oh, man, I lost my faith, if something goes wrong.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes. Now, in the final episode in this four-part series...the next program...we are going to talk about kind of like when genuine tragedy strikes, when something beyond our control happens and it throws us off kilter or it disorients us. So, that will be the final program, but for this one, Darrell, we want to talk more about kind of the things *we* do...the mistakes *we* make sometimes that actually cause us to stall out of regress and go backward a little bit.

DARRELL DELANEY

Are you saying that I make mistakes, Scott? Wait a minute!

SCOTT HOEZEE

I'm not saying it about you, but I can say it about me, and most people I know; maybe you are the exception, I don't know...

DARRELL DELANEY

No, I'm only kidding. I do make mistakes in this walk with Jesus, my wife will tell you; but it is actually important for us to know that there is a way that God can address the things that we drop the ball on...the

things that we make mistakes with. He is not looking for us to be perfect, but he is looking to perfect us in our walk with him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and before we close out this program, we are going to kind of talk about how that all goes, and how God himself responds to our goofs and to our own self-inflicted setbacks; but as we start the program, Darrell, we want to think about a very famous setback by somebody who was perhaps one of the closest disciples Jesus ever had...one of the lead apostles who emerged as the leader of the early Church after Pentecost, and that is the Apostle Peter. Now, some of our listeners are probably thinking: Oh, yeah, yeah; that time that he denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed, you know...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that was bad...that was a bad mistake; but we actually want to go to something that happened even later, after Pentecost, after he had been anointed by the Holy Spirit, and he still ended up doing something that made him go backward.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, after his restoration...after Jesus says: Feed my sheep...and then after he has this powerful speech in Acts Chapter 2...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

He actually does have more things that happened. So, we thought that he was going to ride off into the sunset, spiritually speaking, but we realize that there were more issues with his life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly. One of the things that we find out early on in the book of Acts, after Pentecost, is that the disciples themselves...the apostles now...kind of thought that following Jesus was going to stay a Jewish thing. That it was going to be the chosen people of God, people with an Israelite heritage...a Jewish background; but, in Acts Chapter 10, there is this well-known story of Peter being in the city of Joppa, and he has this vision on the roof. He is up there sunbathing or, I don't know what he is doing, but he has a vision, and God lets down this sheet filled with all the animals that Israel had never eaten because Leviticus said they were unclean; and yet, God tells Peter: Take and eat; and Peter then says kind of, what is going on here? And God says, you know, I am declaring clean the things that we once thought were unclean; and it quickly, Darrell, shifts from not just food but to people.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, that is an interesting thought, because God's idea for the Israelites to be cross-cultural missionaries, if you will, that is not a new thought; but the thought was lost on the Israelites. They thought: Oh, we are special because God chose us; but they didn't realize that that was the original plan. So, when God gives Peter this vision in Acts Chapter 10, then he is reminding them that this has always been part of the master plan, that all people would be joining in, Jews and Gentiles alike.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is why it is also significant, Darrell, that this happens in the city of Joppa, which is the city Jonah fled to when he didn't want to go include the Ninevites, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Peter is getting the same message Jonah had to get: I am here for all people. So, then Peter has this vision, and no sooner does the vision end and there is a knock on the door, and it is a contingent of people from a Roman Gentile named Cornelius, who are going to invite Peter over. Peter goes with them because he kind of figures God just told him he had to; and he goes there, he preaches to these people...these Italians...you know, these Romans...and the Spirit comes on them; and Peter has an interesting reaction, starting in verse 34.

DARRELL DELANEY

Let me read that in verse 34: Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, ³⁵but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶You know the message God sent to the people of Israel announcing the good news of the peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. (Moving to [verse] 44) While Peter was still speaking those words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." ⁴⁸So, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I wish that were sort of the end of the story for Peter on this, because that is wonderful, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, major, major paradigm shift and worldview change for him. God's people, now, includes the Gentiles; and he accepts them, he stays with them, he probably eats the non-Kosher food they served him...

DARRELL DELANEY

He ate pork chops and everything.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right...pizza; but unfortunately, that is not the end of the story. So, now we need to go to Galatians Chapter 2, where the Apostle Paul caught Peter in a moment of, you know, one step forward, two steps back, where Peter regressed; and so, starting at verse 11 in Galatians 2, Paul says: When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. ^{12a}For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when these other Jews arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid... ¹³The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. ¹⁴When I saw they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile, and not like a Jew. How is it then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?... (and so forth)
So, basically Paul confronts Peter and yells at him, and he is pretty blunt here. He is saying: You are being a hypocrite. How did that happen to Peter?

DARRELL DELANEY

It is interesting because the Jews who came from wherever they came from...the history on this...scholars call them Judaizers, who were coming to pressure and make sure that everyone is following the law of Moses. Even Gentiles need to be circumcised, according to these people; and the peer pressure for Peter must

have been tremendous because he is out here living for Jesus...he is out here preaching the gospel...but then, he is far from home.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, then the customs are different and there is a different way to live, and the problem is, I think he fell off into some pressure...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

It happens to us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it happens. So, here is a setback in his own growth as a disciple. If it can happen to an apostle, it can happen to anybody; and we are going to talk about that next.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

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

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we just saw the example of Peter's failure to follow through and be consistent with what he knew was the truth about Jesus and the gospel; and you know, Darrell, I think we can all identify with that...

DARRELL DELANEY

I can.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because it is an unfortunate truth that sometimes we act differently when we are with different people.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, there is this story, and I don't know where it comes from, about a chameleon that changes colors so often that he forgets his original color; so that the problem is when you are hanging around different people which color are you going to be? If you don't have an integrity that is going to keep you who you are, the pressure that Peter had is that he changed colors when the Jews came, he changed colors when the Gentiles came.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the Bible has a very devastating word for that and it is *hypocrisy*. A hypocrite in the Greek world was an actor, and because all actors were male, sometimes if they played females, they had to hold a mask in front of their face...right...

DARRELL DELANEY

A mask, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is a false front. That will never do for a disciple, right? We need to be true-blue to Jesus, right on through to our hearts; but like you said, Darrell, we can all become chameleons. We know in our hearts, maybe, all people bear the image of God; and yet, we fall in with certain people in our life, and all of a sudden we are laughing at racist jokes that they are telling; or maybe we even tell a racist joke ourselves; or, you know, as a Christian we know that all women are made in God's image, and are our sisters in Christ, and yet, fall in with the wrong crowd, going after work for a drink or something, and all of a sudden you are doing this, what they call locker room talk...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you are making sexist comments and derogatory comments about women. That is kind of being a hypocrite. It is a setback in our growth as a disciple.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is painful when you realize that you did that, because you know it goes totally against being a disciple and following Jesus. It is the opposite of what you professed when you made your profession of faith; it is the opposite of what you said you would want to be about; and when you want people to look at you, you want them to think you are a disciple who is intentional; but then, you get caught up in the pressure. It could be fear, it could be pride, whatever those things are, but the good news is that God understands why we do what we do, and he can help us to get it right at any time, but we need to be honest about where we are and name that place.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and knowing but not consistently doing what is right...this is something the Apostle James was really concerned about. We assume, I guess, that James wrote about this as much as he did because he knew the people—the Christians—to whom he was writing were struggling with this also...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, let's listen to a few verses from James 1:

²²Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. ²⁶Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

DARRELL DELANEY

Man, he hits us right between the eyes with that one because we need to understand...to me it is ridiculous for you to go in the mirror and look at yourself and then forget what you look like...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And just like that, he is making the comparison that it is ridiculous for you to say: I am listening to the law but not putting it into practice. Jesus made a reference to that. He said the wise people are the ones who do the law, and they are the ones who are building their house on the rock, as opposed to the foolish ones who don't put it into practice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; yes, yes, you look at yourself in the mirror and say: Hey, I've got a smear of mustard on my face...walk away and forget and go the rest of your day with mustard on your face...

DARRELL DELANEY

It's embarrassing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Why did you look in the mirror in the first place if you are not going to do anything about what you see? So, that is what James really wanted, and that is why, Darrell, as we were saying a minute ago, if we are chameleons...if we are different in front of different people...and engage regularly in activity that we know is un-Christ-like, we cannot grow, right? We are going to stall out.

DARRELL DELANEY

That is right; and this the thing that really challenges me. It is not about one or two things in a behavior that God wants us to change; it is about a lifestyle that he wants to see. Just like the example of...I think you had this example once before...where if you are on a diet, you cannot just eat a snack today and then try to go hard and do the diet for three days and then do a snack again that you know is totally not healthy for you, because you need a consistent pattern to help you change. That is a lifestyle requirement.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; yes, you cannot diet three days a week and go off four days a week. It doesn't work at all; and James warns about being *polluted by the world* in that last verse from James 1 that we just read, but of course, most Christians don't think that that means a total withdrawal from the world, right? Was it the Puritans who said you need to be in the world but not of it; and being able to do that is itself the mark of a mature disciple, I think.

DARRELL DELANEY

H. Richard Niebuhr* wrote this book called *Christ and Culture*, and in that book, he is explaining these different levels of how Christians interact with the culture around them. So, I think that, as Christians, we need to understand that God hasn't pulled us out of this world. We are still living in it, and yet, we have to navigate it in a way that is honoring to him. That is possible with his help.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we become discerning, right? We look at things with a critical eye; we look at things through the lens of Jesus, and figure out...so, I am not totally withdrawing from the world...I am not going to not have a TV, but if I consistently watch this kind of show, it is going to slow me down in getting more like Jesus. If I continue to absorb this, then I am going to stall out...I am going to regress; and so, it's not that I never watch TV, but I am critical and discerning about what kind of TV I watch.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, there is a scripture that Paul talks about where it says: Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial for us. So, we have to understand what actual benefit will there be to watch that show, or to go there, or to eat this, or to do that. It is not about do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, because we have the freedom in Christ to do whatever we want to do; however, it has to be under a modicum of honoring God. It has to be under the disciple and ambassador role that we are carrying. So, we have to be careful and discerning, and that doesn't happen by myself. As a disciple, I need a team of people around me to help me

discern that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is exactly right. Accountability groups and mentors and... Yes, those things are more important than we...or spiritual directors, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In some parts of our tradition...the Reformed tradition, anyway...the idea of a spiritual director seems kind of foreign, but it is not a bad idea at all; and you know, we want to get to the point...I think all of us...where we say: You know, ten years ago I would have laughed at a racist joke like that just to be polite, but I am not doing it anymore. I am not going to tell a joke like that; and if somebody tells it to me in my presence, I am going to tell them I am offended and I don't want to have any part in it. That would be a sign of...

DARRELL DELANEY

Progression...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Of growth; yes, exactly. Unfortunately, we do have those mistakes, and you were saying earlier, Darrell, then what? What do we do when we mess up? What does God do when we mess up?

As we close the program, we want to kind of end on that kind of a pastoral note. What happens when we mess up, and how does God put us back on track? So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are wrapping up this third program, Darrell, in a four-part series on growth in discipleship; and this program has been all about things we do, mistakes we make, bad habits we fall into, that stall out or actually cause us to go backward in our walk. We thought about how that happened to Peter and how he sometimes became a kind of apostolic chameleon, right? He acted differently in front of one group as opposed to the other; and unfortunately, the way he behaved in one group was sinful. It was wrong; and we just talked about how we all do that, too. So then, the question becomes, Darrell, then what? Is there any hope to get back on a track to growth?

DARRELL DELANEY

So, it is important for us to know that somehow in God's wisdom and his divine providence, he has factored in all the mistakes that we are making...all the problems, all the setbacks. So, for us that are walking linearly, we have...we think it is a step backward, but it actually doesn't have to be because our God is gracious and our God is interested in being the author and the finisher of our faith, but he also is interested in helping us sustain it. So, in his grace and mercy, he is able to help us. So, the short answer is yes, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and so, we just need to remember some basic gospel truths. In fact, at one point, when Paul was writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy, he tells us very simply what the purpose of the whole gospel is. It was one of these trustworthy sayings that were circulating in the early Church, and Paul would kind of approve of them; and one such saying that Paul said: Yes, that nails it is: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And that is us. So, God is gracious. God was gracious to Peter. He forgave him, you know, after Paul confronts him; and he is gracious to us. We have to be able to confess our sins to God. We have to be honest about it.

DARRELL DELANEY

I just wanted you to know, Scott, that there is no way that I can make it each day without that grace; without being able to come to God and ask for forgiveness, and to be able to repent for the things that I did wrong; there is no way I could function—there is no way I could move forward.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; what is that line, I think in Romans, where Paul says...he talks about God's grace, and then he says: (5:2b) in which we now stand...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In other words, we are marinating in grace...we are neck deep, thank God, in grace. Grace is where we live. But you know, in 1 John 1, John has some words about all of this. He says: ⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his Word is not in us.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think, Scott, what is most important for us to know with this verse is that sin is part of the equation no matter what. That the sin is there. The problem is that if we don't confess to sin, if we don't acknowledge that we actually have sin, now we have a problem, Houston. We really do have a big problem. Denying that we really have this issue going on in our lives is something that God would like to address. There is no way to move forward if you don't acknowledge you've got it going on in your life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, this is maybe a little...a paradox, a juxtaposition or something...where it is not a sign of being an immature disciple that you have to confess your sins a lot, it is a sign that you are mature.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, ironic.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is something; because you don't want to lie to God. I mean, all of us who are parents or grandparents or, you know, if we have nephews and nieces we are close to, or something...of course we are never happy if a kid does something wrong, but you can forgive that, right? They throw a baseball through a window, you know, we can forgive that. We will replace the window; but what always made me tighten up is if they lied to me about it.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not so bad that you did something wrong, but don't lie to me about it, and I think God feels the same way.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think that to make excuses and provisions for our sins is something that I don't think our holy God would tolerate, but when we are able to own it and actually say yes, this was me, I did this, now there is room for you to grow. I think that actually lets people know that we are depending on God to help us with the problem, when we are able to name it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly, yes; so, I mean...for now, as we live between the times—in the already and the not yet—the kingdom has not fully come; we have not been fully sanctified or transformed yet...for now, our lives are an ongoing series of dying and rising with Christ. We die to self, we repent of our sins, and then we come alive again; but not just coming alive to say: Well, good; that is done; I am forgiven. But, to arise to determine to do better next time, right? That is part of what it means to grow as a disciple, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, when I was a kid, Scott, I used to watch *GI Joe*, the cartoon, and at the end they would always have this moral thing that you should do, but then the kid would say: Now I know. And GI Joe would say: Knowing was half the battle. But then, they would make me crazy, because I wanted to know what the other half was. In the scripture here, we see that knowing that you did the sin is half the battle; the other half is to get up and to do something about it—to choose to go a different way. So, you have to have the knowing and you have to put it into practice to change your life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, it is an ongoing process, and that is true of anybody, even the apostles. In fact, Paul talked about this in Philippians 3.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right here it says: ¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or that I have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it's a race. Paul often compares us to being an athlete in training. We are always going to be in training, right? We are not going to get to the goal of complete Christ-likeness this side of glory; but the main thing is, you just keep on going; you just keep on going and you keep on going. You stumble, you fall, as we have been thinking about here, but then you...by grace, God picks you back up and you keep on going.

DARRELL DELANEY

To keep pressing on is the goal to continue to walk with Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The goal that God has called us heavenward to, and to that we all say: Amen.

DARRELL DELANEY

Amen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney. We hope you will join us again next time as we close out our series on discipleship by digging into scripture to help us better understand what discipleship looks like when we experience tragedy or crises that threaten to shatter our faith.

We have a website; it is groundworkonline.com. Please visit it and share what *Groundwork* means to you, or give us ideas for future *Groundwork* programs.

***Correction:** The audio of this program misstates that Munger is the author of *Christ and Culture*, when in fact H. Richard Niebuhr authored *Christ and Culture*. Robert Munger authored the book *My Heart – Christ's Home*. The passage Darrell refers to in this episode is from H. Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture*.

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