

Who is God?

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the beginning, God... Those are the first four words of the Bible from Genesis 1:1. In the beginning, God... God was there before creation, before time, God was there before was was; and if you go to the last verse of the Bible, in Revelation 22, you read the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. God is there at the beginning and at the end, which is itself really just a new beginning. The Bible is about God, but who is this God? What does scripture reveal about God from Genesis to Revelation? Today on *Groundwork*, we will wonder about some basic questions as to the person and being and nature of no less than Almighty God himself. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, on this program we are beginning a new series on what we are calling basic Christianity, or we could borrow C. S. Lewis's title from his well-known radio talks that became a book called *Mere Christianity*.

DAVE BAST

Right; and by that we don't mean it is somehow dismissive or slight. *Mere Christianity* means common Christianity, the Christianity of most people in all times and places. It is basic in the sense that it is the thing that most Christians have agreed on; even across the major differences, the denominational differences, Protestant, Catholic even, and Orthodox. Still, I think, as Lewis points out in the introduction to his book, *Mere Christianity*, it is ninety percent of the whole. That is what all Christians who are faithful in the sense of being linked to the historic Christian faith, it is what they believe in common.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So this series will be kind of a refresher course—Theology 101; whether you are a new believer who is just coming into the faith and learning a lot of this for the first time or whether you are a long-time believer, it is always good to have a review and a refresher of some of basic things we believe. So we are going to start in this program about the nature and character of God. On future programs in this series we are going to look at the nature of humanity, the works of God, and then some thoughts about discipleship and what it means to live in the kingdom of God. So, those are things coming up, but we begin in this one with the nature of God; and let's just start, Dave, I think with a very basic question, and that is how do we know anything about God at all?

DAVE BAST

Well, it is a fundamental question, isn't it? And especially when you realize that God is not a thing—God is not an it—God is not the highest being, as he has sometimes been described, because that implies that he is part of creation; that he is just at the top of the chain or the top of the heap; when in fact, Christian orthodoxy has always taught that God is completely outside of his creation. God as he is in himself is radically separated from the creation. He is not a part of it, so you cannot investigate him like you can a fish or an animal or geology or psychology.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You want to study geology, go dig up a rock and look at it, right? But you cannot go out and get God. God has got to kind of get you—God has to find you, and he does that through what we in theology call the doctrine of revelation. God reveals God’s self to us; and we have always said in theology, there are two main types of revelation: General revelation and special revelation.

DAVE BAST

And they have both been described as books. Former generations of Christians love to talk about the “book of nature,” which you could read and find out about God just from studying it. You could deduce that there is a God from the greatness of the creation, from the order that is within the creation, from the design that seems to point to a designer, at least in former generations almost everyone agreed on that. Even non-Christians at least accepted the fact that there was a Creator God, and the Bible proclaims this, too, that God’s existence and some of his attributes can be known by reading the book of nature. So we have a passage like this from Romans 1, where Paul writes:

¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all of the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

So Paul is talking about God’s judgment, not because they have rejected Jesus or because somehow they have rejected the Bible; these are all people, even those who don’t have the Bible, because Paul says:

¹⁹What may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them, ²⁰for since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

So there is general revelation—general to everyone, available to all. All you have to do is look up at the sky.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is where theology—*Theos logos*—the word about God, that is what theology means...this is where it begins; in fact, the very first term paper I ever wrote in seminary was on that passage you just read from Romans 1, because revelation is where you start, because if there is no revelation you cannot know God; and so, through the creation itself, Paul is saying, and he will say something similar in Acts 17 when he is debating with some of the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill, and he will say: You know, you’ve had a chance to know the true God all along; just look at the stars, look at the mountains, look at the beauty of creation. So, you can learn about God through creation. What you can learn is a little limited, right? You just said you are not going to learn about sin, per se, or Jesus or the Gospel by looking at sunsets or coral reefs, but you will learn that there is a very powerful, awesome, majestic God who created all of that, and that is sort of what you get through general revelation.

DAVE BAST

Right; and God’s wisdom, too, we might add. The Bible is full of references to the wisdom of God: In wisdom you have made all these things. So yes, you can learn some very important things about him; but to really learn to know him, which is the goal of the whole deal...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

We need something more than that. We need a word from God, and that is what we mean by special revelation; the fact that this God...and it is an amazing fact, if you stop to think about it...the Creator of all things is not so aloof and distant, so some power out there beyond Pluto, outside... He wants to be known by us, so he has spoken to us in human language; and I think that one of the most beautiful places that makes that point is Psalm 19, which starts out famously, talking about general revelation: The heavens are declaring the glory of God; and then halfway through the psalm it makes this switch to the Word of God—the Law of God—the precepts of God—the statutes of God—God making himself known more particularly through human language.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is indeed scripture, and the Bible, that God worked through human beings all along for a very long time to in-scripturate—to get into writing the truths about...above all, the truths about our need for salvation, and that God is the source of life and God will be the source of our *new* life by forgiving the sin that came and spoiled the good creation; and in fact, general revelation and special revelation now work together. John Calvin famously said that because we are sinful people we can look at the beauty of creation and still miss it, and a lot of atheists and agnostics do; and so Calvin said even to see God correctly in nature now you need what he called: The eyeglasses of scripture. You have to put on the spectacles of scripture, which focus your vision and allow you to see God better also in the natural world; but all of it...all of it works together to tell us who God is, that God is love, that God wants to save us from our sins. All of the scriptures, including what we call the Old Testament, ultimately lead us to Jesus, and Jesus himself, by the way, pointed this out in Luke 24. This is on the day of the resurrection, the famous Emmaus Road story, right? Jesus catches up with these two disciples who are leaving Jerusalem. They are very sad that the one they had hoped would be the Messiah had been killed; but of course, he has been raised, and they don't really know or believe that. So, then Jesus says to them in Luke 24:25:

“How foolish you are and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken. ²⁶Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” ²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.

DAVE BAST

You are not going to find God by searching for him. You are not going to spot him by looking through a microscope. You are not going to be able to see heaven through the Hubble telescope out there probing the depths of space. If we are going to find God, he is going to need to come and find us first. The good news is, he has done that, and he has done it through his Word—his Word written—and supremely, his word made flesh. We don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves in the series, but the very first thing he reveals to us as part of this revelation is what we want to focus on next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are beginning a five-part series on basic Christianity...some of the basic things we believe...and we are thinking in this program about some of the basic things we believe about who the true God of the universe is. We said in the first segment that God has to reveal himself to us in nature, and above all supremely through the Word—through the Bible—for us to get to know him. Once we start reading that scripture, one of the first things that we learn right off the bat is that God is the creator of everything. At the beginning of the program I quoted the first four words of Genesis 1: In the beginning, God...; but of course, that was not the end of that sentence. It goes on: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth; and God is first and foremost our creator. The fact that he is the creator of everything is kind of number one on the hit parade of why we praise God; and in fact, we see that even in the book of Revelation. Go all the way to the end of the Bible, John...the curtain of history gets pulled back; he gets to see what is going on right now in heaven; and in Revelation 4 he hears a song:

¹¹You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power; for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

DAVE BAST

Right, amen; and as you said, Scott, the whole Bible is full of praise for God the Creator. It is the first thing to praise him for. The psalmists do it over and over and over again: By your Word you created the heavens and the earth, and they stand fast. Everything, everything in the whole creation...staggering when you think about it...galaxies in the billions upon billions that are so far away that our minds cannot even conceive of the number. We have to count the distance in light years...but from those galaxies down to the subatomic particles that nuclear physicists are struggling to spot and identify...everything in between...God made it all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But for us Christians, it doesn't stop there because we think that God has stayed intimately involved with his creation as well. There is...one of the oldest heresies in the Church is something called deism, which was sort of the idea that, yes, God created the universe but it was kind of like a clock, you know. He just kind of wound it up and now it has just been ticking down on its own and he is elsewhere...he is looking somewhere else. He is not paying attention to his creation; and the Bible everywhere wants to say a very loud no to that. To the God who created atoms and molecules and galaxies and quasars, he is still very close to and involved with and taking care of that same creation.

DAVE BAST

Well, you are right; and it is a common attitude among both serious thinkers and sort of unreflective people alike that God is high up there; he is somehow the first cause or the origin of things; he is the reason that the world exists, but he is not really directly involved. Maybe once in a while he will intervene and do a miracle...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And so people keep praying that he will do that; but really, biblical teaching—basic Christianity—says that God is intimately involved all the time. He rules all things. That is what we mean by what we call God's providence; that he is overseeing—*provideo*—overseeing is the Latin root of that word; and superintending the things that happen. I think I may have quoted this line. It is one of my favorites from G. K. Chesterton, the Christian writer of the early 20th Century, before on a *Groundwork* program, but Chesterton once remarked: The sun does not rise according to the unalterable laws of physics. The sun rises because each day God says to it, "Get up."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, yes.

DAVE BAST

That is the intimacy with which he is involved.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, this comes through in different parts of scripture. One of my favorite parts is in Job 39, when God is questioning Job, and he says: ¹Do you know when mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn? ²Do you count the months until they bear? Do you know the time they give birth? (Then it goes on, you know...) ²⁶Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom? And spread its wings toward the south? ²⁷Does the eagle soar at your command? And it goes on, and what that is saying is, God is still taking delight in these creatures he made, and he is watching deer give birth out in the middle of a field where no human eye can see, but God sees, and he takes delight in that.

DAVE BAST

You know, you make me think of the old riddle: If a tree falls in the forest when no one is there, does it make a sound? Of course it does. God is there. He hears it. He listens. He watches over it. Not a sparrow can fall, Jesus says, without the knowledge and will of the heavenly Father; or we think of Isaiah 55, another great passage from the Old Testament, where God says:

¹⁰As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹so is my Word be that goes out from my mouth. It will accomplish what I purpose for it.

He is arguing by analogy here, that just as his Word is effective...but we can also take from that the fact that rain and snow come at his behest...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And the seasons that bring forth the crops of the fields, this too is under the direct superintendence of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God is sending forth his Word. He is still speaking into his creation; and this is a source of great comfort for us. This is a piece of basic Christianity, but it is not just an arcane piece of academia. This means that God is close to us, that he is close to our lives; that God really does love us and he knows us by name and he takes care of each one of us. You know, there are a lot of people today, especially some younger people, who are going in for what a sociologist named Christian Smith has called moral therapeutic deism, which is kind of the belief that God is just sort of the kindly old man upstairs who is really pretty far distant from our lives. He doesn't really pay attention. He doesn't really...I mean, just try to be good and that will be good enough; but God is not really watching very closely; and the Bible says no to that; that God is watching intimately and lovingly and caringly because he is that close to his creation and to us as his people. It is a great comfort.

DAVE BAST

It is a great comfort, and also a challenge. It can be challenging to faith because when bad things happen, we don't say that somehow God nodded off and that slipped past his guard. Our spiritual parents in the faith, our forefathers and foremothers in the Reformed faith were not shy or hesitant about affirming that providence means that *all* things come to us from God: Leaves and grass, fruitful and unfruitful years, sickness and health; all things come to us, in fact, not by chance but from his Fatherly hand; and that is a huge comfort. It is also a challenge because when bad things happen we wonder: Why did God allow this? Is he angry with me? These are things that faith works on and puzzles over, but I don't like the solution to that that says: Oh, God didn't do that. He is too weak to prevent that from happening.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, so there are a lot of mysteries and hard questions, but what the Bible proclaims is that whatever happens, God is near to us. God is close to us. He is not the deistic God who is far away. God is near to us. He sees us. He is close to us by his Holy Spirit, and he helps us to live as Christ's disciples; but that sentence right there, Dave, where I mentioned God and the Holy Spirit and Jesus gets at another very important, basic idea about God, and that is our belief that God is triune—the doctrine of the Trinity—and we want to look at that next.

Segment 3

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 we are thinking about the nature of God; and in this final segment, Dave, we want to get right to it; the idea that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that he is triune; and I think the first thing to say is that we Christians are still monotheists, that is, we do believe in one God. We still affirm Deuteronomy 6:4:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. We looked at that in a recent series on *Groundwork* on the book of Deuteronomy. God *is* one; we are monotheists. We believe in *one* God; and yet, early on in the Church, almost right from the beginning, we started to talk about triplicate; and so, why do we keep talking in threes with God?

DAVE BAST

Well, yes, here we go. We have about five minutes to explain the doctrine of the Trinity...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, no problem.

DAVE BAST

But you know, we have already handled revelation, God as creator, providence, why not a little bit more, and talk about the nature of this God who has made himself known to us in the book of nature, and supremely in the book of scripture, who is one. There is not more than one God; there cannot be, we all agree on that; but yet, nevertheless, whom Christians worship with three names and in three persons. How did that happen? I think the place to start, as you quoted Deuteronomy, Scott, is to recognize that all Jesus' disciples were Jews who had been raised from infancy in this confession, in this faith, that there is only one God and that his name is Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Israel. How did they start worshipping Jesus? That is the key question.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They worshipped Jesus without it being idolatrous, right?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you worship anybody who is not God it is idolatry, and they had been raised not to do that; and yet, they worshipped Jesus. They recognized Jesus as properly divine; and yet, this same Jesus kept talking about a Father; and he kept referring to the Father—my Father—your Father—and that seemed to be a separate person from Jesus, and then eventually Jesus also starts talking about this Holy Spirit that the Father was going to send on Jesus' behalf. So, now that seems to be a third identity—a third person; and so, where we get all of this is basically from the narrative of the Gospels.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think that is important to point out, and to stress. So there are verses in the New Testament that mention the Trinity. There are stories like Jesus' baptism, where the Father's voice is heard and the Spirit is seen. There is a benediction at the end of II Corinthians 13 that uses the triune name. Jesus famously said: Baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit; but it was the experience of living with Jesus, and particularly the experience of witnessing his resurrection, that launched them on this incredible journey that eventually led the Church to define the Trinity. So again, you said, Scott, we are not supposed to worship any creature. There is actually a point in the book of Revelation when John falls down before an angel, and the angel says: No, don't do that. Get up, I am a creature, too. But when Thomas fell down at the feet of the risen Christ, saying: My Lord and my God. Jesus did not rebuke him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he didn't say...

DAVE BAST

He didn't say: Hey, don't worship me; I am just a man; I am just a guy. Jesus said: Blessed are you, Thomas; and blessed are those who believe without having seen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is an important point because I am sure some of our listeners are aware of some of the criticisms that the Trinity came from Greek philosophy, and the early Church got corrupted by Greek philosophy, and that is where you came up with all of this Trinity stuff... Not at all! It comes right out of the narratives of the Gospel, and the very experience of the disciples, later turned apostles, with Jesus, and yet separating also a

distinctive Father, and a distinctive Holy Spirit—three persons in one God; and sometimes, of course, this doctrine can kind of elicit a yawn from many believers: Oh, so what? But the Bible talks about the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as an inspiring role model for us in our marriages, but also in our congregations. We are to be one with a kind of bond of love and unity and purpose, just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, it is a very practical doctrine. Admittedly, it is a deep mystery...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And it is not easily explained or defined or even described. We are better off saying what it isn't than what it is. It is not that God, you know, was Father in the Old Testament and then in the Gospels he is Son, and now he is Spirit. That is a heresy that was rejected by the Church. It is not that somehow these are subordinate beings to one another. They are all equal in eternity and in being; but there is a very practical point, as you said. We are supposed to be like that, too. We are supposed to be unified; and God in himself, in his very nature, is a community of love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we believe that the whole creation sprang out of the overflow of that love. It was like it just bubbled out of God...

DAVE BAST

It was not like he had to create somebody so he could have someone to love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; but he did create because it is so like God to want to share his life, share his love, with a whole universe of creatures; and we are supposed to be like that, too. That effervescent joy and life sharing within the Trinity is our inspiration as Christians to go and do likewise and share life and love with all people in imitation of our triune God.

DAVE BAST

Well, this is what we believe about God. This is basic Christianity. This is Theology 101; whether you are exploring Christianity or you are a longtime believer, it is great to revisit these basics. So visit us at groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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