

Your Questions about God, Sin, Evil, and Evangelism

SCOTT HOEZEE

Faith is a journey, and whether you are new to the Christian faith or whether you have been a believer your whole life, it is normal to have questions along the way. We are glad when you send us your questions here at *Groundwork*. We love to help you examine scripture so that you can continue growing in faith and see how it applies to your life. So, on this episode of *Groundwork*, we are discussing questions and topics you shared with us this past year. Together, we will talk about the forgiveness of sins, whether or not we need to be able to identify all of our sins; we will discuss God's sovereignty and whether or not he is the author of evil; and we will consider our role and the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelism. So, 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 indeed, Darrell, as we just said, we collect questions from our listeners. Sometimes they e-mail us directly...or they send us a physical letter...if you are a regular e-mail subscriber for *Groundwork*; and if you are not, you can go to the website and find out how to do that, so you will always be up to date. Then you will get some surveys from us once in a while that encourage you to zip us back a note. So, on this program, we are going to consider three of them, but they are questions that get asked more often than that as well.

DARRELL DELANEY

The question we want to ask and address today was e-mailed to us from Diana. She says: I have the knowledge that I have sinned, but there are times I cannot figure out what the sin was. Is there a way to determine that? So, when I pray at night, I ask for forgiveness for the sins that I had done during the day. I know that he would want us to remember what it is we did. Do we remember, and how do we determine?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Quite a few people now and then will ask a somewhat related question: Can God really forgive all my sins? Does God really...is there enough forgiveness for all my sins? But Diana's question is along those lines, and what she is concerned about is what about the sins we are not even aware of? And I guess, if we were honest, Darrell, you could try...and some people are more diligent about this than others, I suppose...you could try at the end of every day, or you could try every Sunday in church when you get to the confession part of the worship service...you could try to remember everything you did wrong, but I doubt very few people get it all. Right? I mean, we forget, we didn't notice, you know. So, it is...let's just admit it...it is very hard to be fully aware of everything that we may have done that would count as a sin.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is important to think about the fact that we have the human experience that goes in these different directions where we understand there is a journey part of that; and I think it is important to know that there are people in scripture who went through these kinds of things, and it is very cool to see that the Lord has put

that in scripture so that we could see examples of peoples' lives who are praying these prayers and trying to figure out the difference between...okay, these sins I committed and these sins I omitted that I forgot to do something that I should have done...there is a way to determine that in the Bible; and they have specific prayers, like this one here from Psalm 19. It says:

⁹The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous. ¹⁰They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. ¹¹By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward. ¹²But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think that is exactly what Diana is asking about, Darrell. Forgive my hidden faults; forgive the things that I am not even aware of...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But you [God] are, right? You said something just a minute ago, Darrell, that touched on sort of a traditional way to delineate sin, and that is the old sins of *commission* and sins of *omission*...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we usually are more aware of our sins of commission...the things we actually actively did wrong. In fact, some of us, you know, get haunted by some of our sins of commission. I did something five years ago that was so dumb, that hurt my wife's feelings so bad, that five years later I am still kicking myself about it, right? I mean, I know she forgave me...I know God forgave me...I am trying to forgive myself. So, we tend to remember that stuff. It is harder to remember the things we omitted to do. We can remember the cutting comment we made that, you know, belittled somebody, but we are less likely to remember that time when we could have said something nice, and we just chose not to. We didn't say anything, but that is wrong, too. Or we could have done something helpful, but we just walked the other way. We are not as likely to remember those omission sins as the overt, commission ones; although, we can forget commission sins, too, I guess.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that is true, Scott. Scripture actually encompasses that as well. I was thinking about the verse when you were speaking that says: Do not withhold good to those when you have the power to act, which is in Proverbs Chapter 3 [verse 27]. But then, in Psalm 139 here, picking up at verses 23 and 24, it says: Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

So, the fact that the psalmist is saying if there be anything, whether I know about it, whether I don't know about it. That was a prayer that me and my friends would pray a lot when I was coming up in the faith. We have been friends for over 20 years, but we would say: Forgive us, Lord, for the sins we know about, and the ones we don't know about. Knowingly and unknowingly, forgive us, God.

I think that it is important, too, to think about accountability can help you here...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly, yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

Because we need a community of folks. It is not designed for me to walk this faith on my own, and if Diana could hear that, I think she would know that there is great reward in knowing that you can walk with someone who can see that fault that you may or may not be aware of, and bring it to your attention.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Earlier in Psalm 139, there is this interesting line where the psalmist essentially says: God, you know me better than I know myself, which is kind of scary, except that at least we can trust that knowledge with God, but you know me better than I know myself; but sometimes, Darrell, sometimes in certain areas of our life, our friends know us better than we know ourselves; and a good friend will point it out. A good friend will do what the Apostle Paul...we have said this quite often on *Groundwork* over the years...but if you read the New Testament, and Paul in particular, but you can pick it up in Peter and John and the other apostles, there seems to be this idea that rebuke would be a regular part of being a member of the Church; that we are going to confront each other in love, to say: You know what, Darrell? You cannot do that. That thing your doing...or Scott, you have to knock that off. Confess your sin and ask the Holy Spirit to straighten you up. That is, indeed, one way we can start to identify our hidden faults; but there will still be some leftovers, so, to regularly pray: Oh, Lord, forgive what I did wrong that I am not even remembering; forgive me for not remembering while you are at it, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, it is true. There is an ancient practice that is called Examen, where you do, at the end of the day, take stock of what your day was like. What did you learn? What did God teach you? Where are some of the areas that you might have fell off? Where are some of the areas you might have made a mistake? And the Holy Spirit can actually help you walk through that, too; but again, I would recommend you do that with a buddy or a mentor or a pastor or a family member; someone who can walk with you; and as we look at this next segment, we are going to talk about the questions that people have with God's power and the problem of evil. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Darrell, this is a listener question program. We have three questions from three listeners that have come into our *Groundwork* production office of things people wanted us to talk about. We just heard from Diana, wondering about the forgiveness of sins, and can God forgive even the sins we cannot articulate and remember; and we said yes; grace is always abounding. The Bible always makes it clear there is more grace than there is sin, and that is part of the good news of the Gospel; but now, we have another question from a listener named Keith.

DARRELL DELANEY

I have encountered, in the Bible study that I sponsor, several very knowledgeable Christians who believe that since God is sovereign, that he is also the author and purveyor of sin and evil. So, it is more of a comment. It is the problem of evil, again with this centuries old argument: Is God the author of evil or is he not? What is going on there?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we should just pause a minute to say that sovereignty means...you know, I mean, sometimes a king or a queen is called the sovereign because they are in charge of the whole land. So, when we say that God is sovereign...and in the Reformed tradition that you and I are a part of, Darrell, the sovereignty of God...that was a big deal for John Calvin, and so it is kind of a big deal...

DARRELL DELANEY

J.I. Packer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and for a lot of the classic Calvinists...

DARRELL DELANEY

A.W. Tozer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the sovereignty of God...that God is sovereign; God is over everything. Everything, somehow or another goes back to God—to God's rule—to God's reign—to God's kingdom. God is over all. He is in charge of, he has the authority over all. That is what sovereignty means, but as Keith points out, that kind of ends up begging a question like, well, if he is over all and is in charge of all, and we are in a world where lots of bad things happen...sin and evil...what role does God play in that? Does sovereignty mean he is pushing those buttons, too?

DARRELL DELANEY

So, sovereignty means he is free and clear to do whatever he decides to do; and the fact that he is a good God means that we can trust him, and that he has our best interests at heart; but it doesn't mean that he is micromanaging every single thing, and pushing all the buttons and moving all the knobs and mechanisms...thinking about Oz right now...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is interesting that...I mean, God is transcendent and he is eminent, but it doesn't mean that he is controlling the free will of the people he created. They still have a choice whether to do right or to do wrong; and I think that there is a verse about this in James Chapter 1, and I would like to read it, starting at verse 13. It says: When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. ¹⁴But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

The little saying that I have remembered that has helped me is the fact that God *tests*, but does not *tempt*. That temptation comes from something inside of us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; do not say God is tempting me, James writes. You know, philosophers...people like Alvin Plantinga...have dealt with this a lot, and it can get, indeed, very philosophical, and we don't want to lose anybody in the philosophical weeds on this program in answer to Keith's observation here; but it is one thing to say that God set up a world in which bad things could happen...bad choices could be made.

Philosophically, we say: That maybe was also a condition for love being freely chosen. Nobody wants to live in a world where you are a preprogrammed robot, where you fall in love with somebody because you are preprogrammed to do it. No; even God wants love to be freely chosen, but just maybe, in a world where that is possible, bad choices have to be possible, too. So, ultimately, God is sovereign; ultimately, God created a world where bad choices could be made, but that doesn't mean he wants those bad choices, and it sure doesn't mean he is the author of them, or the one who is making bank robbers pull a trigger to kill a clerk or making a person drink too much and then get behind the wheel of a car and kill somebody. God is not making those people do that. He is not willing that thing to happen. He grieves it, even though, yes, God set up a world where those conditions of bad choices are possible, so it goes back to God that way, but that is very different than saying this is what he wants or this is what he does.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that goes back to what you were saying about Adam and Eve in the garden. It happened in paradise, and they made a decision that had consequences to it, which is why we are in this fallen state now; but God is in the process of redeeming it by using believers.

I also want to talk about the fact that you said that God is the one who there is no temptation in him, there is no sin in him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I wanted to bring that verse up from 1 John 1, beginning at verse 5, that talks about that. It says: ⁵This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

So, that very verse that says he is the light, there is no darkness in him, there is no sin in him. That pretty much answers the question whether he is the author of the sin.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; a little later in that same letter, in Chapter 3 at verse 4, John writes: Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.

In the Greek that is *antinomia*; so, the lawlessness is the opposite of God. We recently did a series on the Ten Commandments here on *Groundwork*, where we made it clear that God is the embodiment of God's own law...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God is the straight stick against which all crookedness in the universe gets measured and determined, right? So, God cannot be the author or purveyor of sin and evil, because it would be against his very nature. Sin is lawlessness, and the man of lawlessness is a way to refer to Satan in the New Testament. The man of lawlessness is the one who causes the evil and the mayhem. That is the anti-Christ—the anti-God—state of being.

DARRELL DELANEY

And if we remember, the scripture says that Christ himself said: I did not come to abolish the law, but I came to fulfil it. So, he is the very embodiment of the law, which means that all righteousness, all truth, all grace, all goodness...they reside in him and in his DNA. This is a saying that we say in church all the time: God is good all the time; all the time God is good. We don't say God is evil.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

God is good, and that means that his perfect nature has nothing but goodness in it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we should also point out, just to close out this segment in addressing Keith's observation, a pastoral note: We *do* believe God is able to intervene to head off certain evil things; and we believe he does. He does heal people of cancer. He brings people out of addiction. He prevents car accidents from happening sometimes, maybe in answer to our prayer to please keep Sally safe, Lord, when she goes out driving tonight. God *can* do that, and God *does* do that. We mostly don't know about those things because you cannot talk about the accident that didn't happen...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But we believe he can. However, on a pastoral note, that doesn't always help when Sally gets killed, and then the parents as you as a pastor: Why didn't God prevent that? Why didn't God keep Sally safe? There is no answer to that. We as pastors have to fall back and say: I don't know...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I don't know why, but I do know God is with you in your grief. I do know it is not what God wanted. He understands your lament and your anger. Pastorally, this question of evil and stuff, it leads to heart-wrenching conversations that we cannot fully understand this side of glory; and I think that is important to point out.

Well again, that is a huge topic that we could talk about for at least another program or so, but we will stop there, but thank you, Keith, for your question. We are going to dig into one more question that someone asked about evangelism. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

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 we are doing a listener question program here. We have had two good questions from Diana and Keith, and now we have another question that somebody sent in. We don't have a name attached to this one, but here is the question: To what extent should the Church do evangelism? We know that no one will come to Christ except by the Holy Spirit, so should we still reach out and do evangelism? This, too, Darrell, is kind of an age-old question in some ways.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; you know, Scott, sovereignty versus free will...you know, we talked about sovereignty in the last segment a little bit; but then, you know, election...is God calling them? I mean, if he is electing them, it doesn't matter what I do, right? Or, you know, if he isn't electing them, and they are "reprobate," then what is the point of evangelism? I think that this argument has been going on for a long time, but I think it is important for us to remember, number one: Election and God's sovereign choice, that is him, that is his department. We have nothing to do with that. We don't know the hearts of people, but he has given us instructions, and we need to obey those instructions with all of our hearts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly, right; we don't get to see the hidden counsel of God, and so we can never presume we know where our evangelism will be effective and where it won't. We don't. We have no idea. Usually, we are blown away by the person we thought we would be successful with, they turn us away, and the person we thought we would never reach in a million years *bang* they believe the Gospel like right on the spot. So, you know, you never know.

It is interesting, though. Years ago, in the 1960s, within the Christian Reformed Church of North America, there was a seminary professor...the missions professor actually...his name was Harold Dekker, and he published a really controversial article, where he said: You know, Christian Reformed missionaries don't seem to be as successful as people from other traditions, and I think I know why. We believe in election and in limited atonement. The atonement of God is limited to the elect; and so, our missionaries never dare go up

to somebody and say: Jesus died for your sins; because if they are not elect, we are not sure we can say that; and so, we tend not to say that. It yielded to a huge controversy that consumed the CRC through the middle part of the 1960s; but the point being, you know, we don't know who we are talking to at any given moment, right? We cannot even tell when we look at the church, which is the church invisible and which is the church visible...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We cannot tell who in the church is really saved and who is just sort of sitting in a pew. As you said...I like what you said...that is not our department; that is God's.

DARRELL DELANEY

And yes, it is not our department to know what is going on in the hearts of people. I think we need to understand that we have a God who is missional, and he sends people; that's what he does; and that is our call, to go as sent ones to wherever he may send us. Romans 10 picks up this, and pick it up at verse 14. It says this: How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one whom they have not heard? (So, they have to hear; and then it says:) How can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵And how can someone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

So, our God is sending people—he is sending people to spread that good news; and you don't have to be a preacher to spread the good news, I just want to let you know that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes, we could say...thinking about someone preaching to them...we could say how can they hear without someone witnessing to them? It doesn't have to be restricted to preaching. So, in other words, Paul is saying: You want other people to come to the saving knowledge of Jesus? You better tell them. There is not going to be skywriting in the sky. You know, a tract isn't going to fall out of heaven and into their lap. It is *your* lips God needs; it is your voice God needs to get the word out there. That is a good thing. You know, I don't know if the person who sent in this question is part of a Reformed tradition, but that certainly in certain areas of Reformed Christianity and Presbyterians, this emphasis on election—on predestination—has sometimes led to some unhappy consequences. There is a well-known scene in a Paul Schrader movie called *Hardcore*, where the actor George C. Scott is in a Las Vegas airport searching for his daughter, who has gotten lost in the world of pornography. He strikes up a conversation with a prostitute, of all people. This is a very buttoned-down man from Grand Rapids, Michigan; and so, she asks what he believes, and he says: Well, we believe in total election, you know, the sovereignty of God; and the prostitute says: So, that's it, huh? I cannot be saved? The game is fixed? He doesn't have a good answer. Rich Mouw wrote a book about that very scene: Calvinism in a Las Vegas airport, in which he said: The thing to say back is: No; the game isn't fixed. We don't know what the game is. You can come to believe, too; right now, Jesus could be calling your name. I have no idea, but the game is *not* fixed in a way that we are helpless; and we have to believe that and let that motivate our witness.

DARRELL DELANEY

And if Jesus is in the process of sending his disciples, I think it is important for them to go, right? There is a verse right before he sends them out. He says: (Matt. 9:37, 38; 10:1 paraphrased) ^{38a}I need you to pray to the Lord of the harvest... The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few... therefore, [ask the Lord of the harvest] to send out workers into his vineyard...so they can go out there and reap that. And then, the next verse he sends them as the answer to their prayer (Matt. 10:1), like, oh, guess what? God is answering our prayer, now you get to go...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, I...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Careful what you pray for, you might be the answer to your own prayer.

DARRELL DELANEY

It's true, and I don't think we can use scripture to nullify scripture. Okay, Romans 9 through 11 talks about God's sovereign choice, but it doesn't nullify the obedient step that it takes to follow what Christ said when he told us to go.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Ephesians 1; there is no contradiction between predestination and active witnessing. Paul says in Ephesians 1:11: In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. (And then he goes on in verse 13, to the Ephesians:) And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. So, in other words, yep; it's all about predestination; and yep; it's all about somebody *telling* you about God; because when you heard it, you realized: I am part of the elect. I have been predestined, but I wouldn't have known that if somebody hadn't told me. So, yes, the Holy Spirit is the one who changes hearts. We cannot do that.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But the Holy Spirit uses you and me and all of us as his hands, his feet, his voice to get the Word of Life across.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I think that the scripture that says: (Romans 8:28) All things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose, works in that. And then when...Genesis 50:20 says that whatever happened for evil, no matter what, God has turned it around for our good and for his glory. So, we thank God that even though he is sovereign, we are the ones who trust in his plans, and we do what he tells us to do. Thanks be to God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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