

Your Questions Answered (part 1)

DAVE BAST

On *Groundwork*, we believe that Biblical inquiry can strengthen our faith, and we are glad you have joined our conversation; so, on this week's program, we will dig into scripture together to answer some of the questions you have asked *Groundwork* this year.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Throughout the year, you talk to us through Facebook, e-mail, and even on occasion, still letters. Some still write letters, Scott. And sometimes those messages from our listeners, which are most welcome, have questions; some of them in response to a particular *Groundwork* program, but others just questions about the Bible or about experiences that one has in living out the faith. So, while we use your ideas and questions to guide our topics throughout the year, we also from time to time like to dedicate one or two programs to answering questions directly on the air. So, that is what we are going to do today. Let's dig in and get started, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, thanks; and we did have – this came through Facebook – we do not reveal the full identity of these folks, of course, but Sharon was wondering how should we think about our past? Does our past define us? Is what I have come through in the past – or maybe what I have done in the past – is that who I am now? We all have memories; we all have a past of some kind or another; we have things we did, sometimes we are not so proud of; how do we think about that? How does God think about that? That is what Sharon is wondering about – that identity – who are we? How do we regard ourselves in the flow of our lives? How does God see us? How can we help get our perspective in line with God on who we are and our identity and how we should think about ourselves?

DAVE BAST

Well, I wonder, too, if maybe something that is behind this, and we do not have a lot of details, so it is hard to say, but if some of it might not be bad things that have happened to us; does that define us? Is it possible to escape a troubled past or a guilty past? There may be things that we have done, as you say, Scott, but what about what others have done to us? Are we damaged goods forever? Is there just nothing but failure? Are we broken people? In a sense, we all are that. Everyone is a broken person to some degree, but what defines our identity as Christians?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, Dave, too, if we think about scripture, particularly the New Testament – there is a sense in which, I am sure, there are Old Testament themes that touch on this as well, but when we think about our identity, who are we today? What about the past? And so forth. There is a lot often in the New Testament that gives us that sense of before and after, and the after is after grace; after we encounter Christ; after the Holy Spirit moves into our hearts through baptism and the outpouring of God's Spirit upon us; that newness is more important in defining us and in how we should think about ourselves and how God thinks about us than

any old memories we could dredge up, either bad things we have done or bad things that were done to us. I think Paul was often good with this, but so was Peter – I think of Ephesians 2, where Paul says to the Ephesians: You were dead in your sins; you were dead, but now God in Christ has made you alive. Or 1 Peter 2:10 where Peter says to his [readers]: Once upon a time, you were no people; you were nobody; but now you are the people of God. So, you get that before and after and all the newness that comes to us in Christ.

DAVE BAST

Or you could define is as outside/inside. Those who are outside of Christ or who do not know him, really – have no relationship with him – and those who are, in the Apostle’s great phrase, in Christ – connected to Christ through faith. I think it is really important to stress this; this is probably the pivotal point because people define themselves by all sorts of things. There is an old debate: What makes us who we are? Is it nature or nurture? Is it what we are born with: your race, your class, your gender, your social status, your nationality; or is it how you are formed and shaped: your education, the advantages you are given, your training, the impact of your family, your parents especially, and how that shapes you. For a lot of people, that is all there is to identity, it is that debate. Well, it is partly nature, partly nurture; but for Christians, we have to believe on the basis of what scripture says, that this decisive event of being united to Christ through faith trumps both nature and nurture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; yes, we tend to define ourselves only on the human level, the horizontal level, but there is the vertical dimension, if you want to put it that way, of God moving into us through the Spirit. I think, too, it occurs to me pastorally – we have said that what may be behind Sharon’s question here is a little bit about bad things we have done, are we really forgiven, but also bad things done to us. I think pastorally we also do not want to be too simple. If somebody was abused as a child, let’s say; if you had a very bad childhood, grew up in an abusive environment where there was psychological and verbal abuse or something far more dire, you would never want to say: Well, once you become a Christian, that just all goes away. You do not have to think about that; it is all wiped out. Well, we still have to deal with that. Pastors and counselors rightly still walk people through the grief they have about that; the damage that that caused to their psyches, to their souls, their spirits; but, we do it in a context of hope, and not merely hope on the human level: If we work hard enough in therapy here, you will overcome all of that; but the hope that we are new in Christ and in the process of becoming more and more like Christ. There is no simple way to transcend a horrible upbringing; but we do it in hope.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I think that is a really important pastoral point to make. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5: ¹⁷If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. You are a new creature. Behold; all things are new. But he also talks about the struggle he himself had with his old nature and the things that he – in Romans Chapter 7. So, yes; in Christ we are a new creation and the past no longer holds us in bondage, but it is still a struggle.

I also would like to point, as you just did, toward the future. Listen to this passage, for example, from 1 John 3 about our identity:

¹See what great love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God. (And that is what we are!) ²Dear friends, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known, but we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

When you think about your identity, do not just think about what you have been in the past, or what you are in Christ, think about what you will be, because God has destined you to be made perfect and glorious and conformed to the image of Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That line that you just quoted, Dave, is from 1 John, but as you said earlier, too, Paul certainly knew this, and Paul regularly – I often think that Paul, on some level, maybe, was tormented sometimes by the memories of when he was the persecutor of Jesus and the people he beat up and the people he jailed and abused because they were Christians. He must have been tormented by that; but yet, he also knew that he was a new creation in Christ and he often held himself up as a role model: Look, if God can make me new; if God can help me

overcome my horrible past as the chief of sinners, there is hope for all of us ultimately in overcoming whatever it was that has happened to us.

DAVE BAST

Next, we will consider a question about vocation and calling in just a moment.

Segment 2

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

And we are doing a listener question program, Dave, from questions people have e-mailed us, Facebooked us, sent us in the mail; and the next question also came through Facebook: How do you know you are doing what God wants you to do in life? How do you know – so, this is a question about vocation and calling – I am doing something; most of us have a job or something that we are doing in life – how do I know that is what God wants me to do? Am I supposed to be doing something else? How would I know? People wonder about this and it is a good question.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is a good question, but whenever I hear it, my mind goes to a verse from John 6:28, where Jesus is approached by some people who ask him a question – you know, he would have made a great *Groundwork* host, especially for the listener question programs – they come to Jesus and say:

28“What must we be doing to be doing the work of God?” (What does God want me to do?) 29And Jesus replies to them, “This is the work of God, to believe on him whom he has sent.”

The first and supreme and most important thing that we need to do to be doing the right thing is believe in Jesus. Just start there. Have you come to Christ? Is your life in Christ’s hands? Are you joined to him through faith?

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the context, then, in which we follow Jesus. That is the main thing; the bottom line. Follow me. Follow me. But of course, even in following Jesus, then we go from there. Paul in particular in the early Church – and when the Spirit was poured out on the early Church – it really just cut loose all kinds of things – all kinds of new gifts and talents and fruit of the Spirit and gifts of the Spirit were unleashed. Places like Corinth in particular, there seemed to be a lot of competition – well, which one is more important? Right away we try to rank things in life; I do not know why we do that, but humans do tend to stratify and rank things – and so, Paul would use the image of the body; like in 1 Corinthians 12, saying: A lot of different gifts, but it is the same Spirit which distributes them; a lot of different kinds of service, but the same Lord; there are different kinds of workings, but in all of them it is the same God at work. Paul really wanted to level the playing field and say: What you do in life is less important than that you do it for God and you recognize it is the Spirit who is doing it through you; they are not more important or less important; they are all necessary, and it is the same God who calls us and equips us.

DAVE BAST

The whole theology of vocation was really developed in the Reformation, probably – I guess in our tradition we tend to look back to the Reformation and the Reformers – but there had developed a two-tiered system of the Christian life as far as obedience and discipleship was concerned; and one of the stories in the early Church that profoundly affected a lot of people was the story of the rich, young ruler, where this young guy comes up to Jesus and says, “What do I need to do?” Again, that question; and Jesus says, “Keep the commandments.” “Yes, I have done that.” “Go sell all that you have and come and follow me.” Out of that,

in the monastic movement there developed an idea that the highest form of calling was to totally renounce one's possessions and become a monk or a nun; go move into a monastery; and then for the common mass of people, if they did not have that heroism, they could live out on a lower level the Christian life. The Reformers challenged all of that right directly head-on by saying, no, all callings are honorable to God. It is not somehow greater to be the religious, as they called them, the religious; or to be a pastor, for that matter. I love this quote from William Tyndale, who first translated the Bible into English. He said, "Between washing dishes and the preaching of the Gospel there is a difference (obviously these are different jobs), but for pleasing God, there is no difference." That was the great insight that the Reformers had: Everybody has a calling.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; and I remember the philosopher, Lee Hardy, who teaches at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He had a book years ago called *The Fabric of This World*, and it was about vocation and calling, and he pointed that out, too; that really, the Reformers wanted to level the playing field by saying every job is sacred when you do it unto the Lord, and every job is something you are called to. Interesting that what you were saying, Dave, a second ago about the monastic orders; my wife and others have often noted, too, particularly because my wife and I both got our master's degrees at the same time. I from seminary, she an English degree from Michigan State University; and people were constantly asking me when I was getting ready to be a new minister, "Oh tell us your call story; tell us how God called you to the ministry." Nobody ever asked her, "How did you get called to want to teach English?" We do not usually even say, "How did you get called to be a lawyer?" How did you get called to be a schoolteacher or a bus driver or a car mechanic? So, we still leave the impression today: Ministers get called and they can be sure that they got the right call, but everybody else has to figure it out on their own and hope for the best; but that is not really true.

DAVE BAST

No; nor does it happen that the clouds are going to part and a sunbeam is going to come down and strike you as harps play, and you will hear a deep voice that sounds like James Earl Jones saying: This is the way. So, getting back to the original question: How do I know I am doing what God wants me to do? One short answer is: Follow your heart. Look at your gifts. What are you good at? If you really cannot speak at all, God may not be calling you to a career that involves public oratory. So, look at your gifts; look at your interests; what are you drawn to? Listen to advice of people who know and love you; pray about it, and then do not worry. The question is, are you following Jesus? If you are following Jesus, you are doing what God wants you to do. Then as far as the particular job or career, do not get too bent out of shape about it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if you are really unhappy with what you are doing, but you are convinced that God has insisted you do this, you could wonder about that, too. Like Frederick Buechner – the writer and the pastor, Frederick Buechner – he said, "What is vocation; how do you know you are doing what you are supposed to be doing? It is wherever your deep delight meets some need of the world." In other words, when there is something that needs doing and you just love doing it – you are delighted to do it – well, that is probably God's confirmation, saying: That is what you are supposed to be doing. If you are not doing that now because you think, "Oh, I really should do something noble," like go into this career, maybe God is saying: No, I think I would like you to do that other thing. I have given you a delight and an ability to do it. If we believe as Christians that the Holy Spirit moves into our hearts, then to say follow your heart is not some romantic, sentimental, Hallmark sentiment; we are believing that the Holy Spirit is in your heart; you are following the Spirit of Jesus at the same time you are following your heart. It is not an either/or.

DAVE BAST

I think it is usually young people who are hung up on the question of the will of God and discerning the will of God for their lives, and who should they marry, and what should their major be in college and what should their career be; when is it time to change careers? All of those questions; and frankly, I think there is no one set answer. I have sometimes used the analogy of a roadmap. You are going from point A to point B; there are different routes you can take, and you will have different scenery and different companions along the

way, but do not worry about it; just make sure you are headed to the right destination, and however you get there, God will use you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Those of us who have had kids in college who ask us as parents those questions, maybe it sounds like a dodge or something to just say: You will just know; or God will let you know; but it is really true. Then again, it is often where your delight meets up with something the world needs done, and that is probably God's way of telling you that you are on the right track.

One more question on this show; we will talk about theology, the Bible, and sometimes what is called the end times or the end of the world. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork* on today's program, which is a listener question program, and we have talked about a couple of questions that came in; one of them dealing with the Christian's vocation or calling; another one dealing with our identity, especially our identity in Christ. The last one refers to a particular passage from the Bible. This is a question that comes fairly often and it has to do with the doctrine or teaching about the rapture; and specifically, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, which I will read right now.

¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven. (Paul is talking about the return of Christ – the second coming – and he is doing it in the context, incidentally, of Christians who are grieving the loss of those whom they have loved, and wondering about it, really.) ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore, encourage one another with these words.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is, indeed, a particular passage that elicits a lot of questions about what is sometimes called the rapture. Will there be a rapture and will there be a long period of time when all true believers will disappear from the earth while life will go on for a thousand years?

We did do a show on this, and if you go to groundworkonline.com and look at our archives, you will find a show on this very passage; it is entitled "Christ is coming back," and we did that, Dave, with our guest host, Meg Jenista, at the time. A person named Uve e-mailed us in particular this question in response to a recent one we did on the Apostles' Creed; on the resurrection of the body; but what is interesting to think about here in terms of what is going to happen at the end when God rings down the curtain on history, what is going to happen? Will there be a rapture? Will there be tribulation? Will there be a millennium? Will it be a multi-staged affair stretched out over thousands and thousands of years, or will it be all at once and Christ will come back and the new creation will come.

What is interesting is that it is not just this passage in 1 Thessalonians 4 that is at issue here. There are some really larger issues of Biblical and theological views of history that play into how you interpret what is going on here.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is exactly right. We need to preface what we say. We do want to respond to the question, obviously; that is why we are addressing it on this program. We want to preface it by saying this is an area where sincere, believing, honest people who love the Bible – Christians – disagree and have different interpretations. I really hate to stir up disagreement, and so we tend to shy away – by we, I mean us – from controversial topics because we want to focus on what C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity," the things that Christians have in common; but frankly, we have a little different understanding of the End Times in the Reformed community, and it has to do with a doctrinal system called *dispensationalism*, which really developed in the 19th Century and has a more negative attitude toward the world. It sees things as getting progressively worse and Christians are a minority and we need to be protected and snatched out of the world.

In the Reformed understanding of scripture, it is much more positive, and we are called to engage the world, and we think the Lord will return, finally, to redeem it, but in the meantime, we are salt and light, engaged in culture and its transformation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

All of which is to say that, indeed, Christians of equal devoutness and piety and love for the Lord and love for scripture do genuinely and honestly divide on this question, but what you were saying, and hinting at, too, Dave, is that this is not just an issue about one particular verse. It is a wider system and it is worth talking about. There is no way we can do it in a six-minute segment here on *Groundwork*, but there is a wider view – different views of history and of how God has launched his saving work. In the Reformed camp that we represent, we believe that when Christ comes it will all happen at once. What Paul described in 1 Thessalonians 4 is not a staged event separated by long periods to time, but all at once. Christ is going to gather all of us together all at once and inaugurate the kingdom and bring the new creation to this Earth. It is also important to not take this fourth chapter of 1 Thessalonians out of context, because this could lead you to think that we are going to be rescued from the Earth; whereas, actually Paul himself will say, and the witness of the New Testament generally is that the Earth will be renewed; so we are joining Jesus in the air, but he is on his way down...

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

at the time, and that is important to know.

DAVE BAST

And what he says here specifically is: Those who will be raptured are both the resurrected saints and the saints who are alive at the moment of Christ's return, and we are caught up together as a welcome home party –as Jesus comes down. You look at the end of the Bible – Revelation says that the kingdom will come down from heaven like a bride and the whole creation will be renewed, and Paul says: So we will always be with the Lord. So, it looks very much to me like it is symbolic language of the return of Christ to renew all things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Pastorally, Dave, you already pointed out the Thessalonians seem to have been under the impression that nobody would die before Jesus came back, and then some of their church members died and they feared they were lost. So pastorally Paul is saying: Jesus has that covered.

DAVE BAST

Yes; do not worry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The main point here is not to sketch out a timeline and a sequence of events; the main pastoral comfort of 1 Thessalonians 4 is that Jesus has your loved ones and you will be together with them forever with the Lord.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture; so visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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