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# Comfort in Times of Community Crisis

## SCOTT HOEZEE

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, most preachers changed their preaching plans for the following Sunday, and a great many of them chose to preach on Psalm 46. At memorial services following events like the shootings in Connecticut or the Boston Marathon bombing, more often than not, a Jewish rabbi or a Christian minister will be asked to read Psalm 46 as part of the service. This is one of the Bible's most comforting of all psalms, and today on *Groundwork*, we are going to dig into this poem to understand its richness even better. 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, we are also welcoming back Ruth Boven, the minister of pastoral care at Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Ruth, welcome back.

## RUTH BOVEN

Thank you; I am glad to be here with you, Scott, and with you, Dave.

## DAVE BAST

Ruth, we are especially glad that you are with us as someone who is actively involved in pastoral care and dealing with people in troubled times in their lives, so let's have a go at it, and today it is Psalm 46.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Psalm 46; and we have looked in this series now – we are in the latter half of this series on passages of comfort, words of comfort from scripture, and we have had slightly different scenarios for each of the programs. In this one, we are thinking about what happens to larger groups of people in a time of national tragedy. Indeed, as we said of Psalm 46, a lot of people of varying religious traditions seem to be drawn to this psalm. People of faiths that are not even Jewish or Christian do not mind hearing this psalm when it is read at interfaith prayer services and so forth. So, we are going to wonder today: What is it about Psalm 46 that functions so well in those settings? Probably the best thing to do is to just read the psalm; it is just eleven verses; and so, why don't we read it? I will read the first few verses and then Ruth will jump in with the balance of the psalm. So here it is; the 46<sup>th</sup> psalm:

<sup>1</sup>God is our refuge and strength. An ever present help in trouble. <sup>2</sup>Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. <sup>3</sup>Though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. <sup>4</sup>There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. The holy place where the Most High dwells. <sup>5</sup>God is within her and she will not fall. God will help her at the break of day.

## RUTH BOVEN

<sup>6</sup>Nations are in uproar. Kingdoms fall. He lifts his voice, the earth melts. <sup>7</sup>The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. <sup>8</sup>Come and see what the Lord has done; the desolations he has brought on the earth. <sup>8</sup>He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the

shields with fire. <sup>10</sup>Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. <sup>11</sup>The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.

### **DAVE BAST**

That is a great psalm. It is not hard to see why we are drawn to it in times of catastrophe or disaster because the psalm is full of imagery of that sort of thing. You can almost feel the earth rumble as an earthquake roars past or a tsunami. It talks about the waters foaming and raging; and then later in the psalm there are images of warfare and fire and burning chariots and melting – so, yes, yes, yes; that is the background, clearly.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, when the earth shakes and the waters roar; again, Super Storm Sandy very recently – and people hear this psalm and say: Yes, that sounds like you are reading right out of the newspaper there. Indeed, we feel this very keenly, or after 9/11 when the buildings fall in New York and the ground shakes and people – this very well describes a sense of disorientation that people often feel, collectively even, as a nation when terrible things happen.

### **RUTH BOVEN**

Well, I think media plays a part in that for us, too; right? It is not hard for us to conjure up those images, even if we are far from them, because they are in our living room. We see them, as you said, in the newspaper, but we see them on television, and so they are in our minds.

### **DAVE BAST**

That is a really good point, I think. It is almost inescapable for anyone anywhere in the world today; and there is this sense of stumbling that comes through, or shaking, or tottering; the psalmist uses those words; and I think probably we have all felt that. I remember – I am a little bit older than you guys – I remember where I was and how I felt on November 22, 1963, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated and I was sitting in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade math classroom when they announced that the President had been shot and was dead. Your knees go weak and I remember even – I was just going on 13 – not knowing what to do, and they dismissed school and I set out walking for home – it was four miles away – instead of waiting for the bus, because I was shaken, and that is the feeling that overwhelms – it can overwhelm a whole society when it is truly an event of that magnitude.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I remember on 9/11 after the September 11 attacks, going to the store to get something quick to make for dinner because we had a prayer service at my church that night, of course, so we needed something quick for dinner. Everybody – the store was very quiet – and everybody had the same look in their eyes. It was as though – they have even talked about how there is almost a national level of posttraumatic stress syndrome because you keep replaying it. Ruth, you were saying about the media replaying the images. You kept replaying the tape in your head of those airplanes and so forth; and everybody seems to feel the same way. As you were saying, Dave, we talk about being knocked for a loop or having the legs cut out from underneath us or being staggered by something, and the opening verses of Psalm 46 capture that very, very well – that sense of disorientation, as though you cannot quite keep your feet.

### **DAVE BAST**

But to capture something else, Ruth, and that is the presence of God – the God who is stable and unshaken and present.

### **RUTH BOVEN**

And you turn to that, right? I mean, my experience of September 11 was coming into the seminary. I was in seminary, and the halls were empty. Sometimes they were empty because most of the people were in class, but this time I could see no one was in their classrooms, and it was very disorienting for me. I found that everyone was gathered in one of the larger rooms and they had the television on; and at one point, Neal Plantinga, the president at the time, stood up, turned the television off, and read Psalm 46.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

That is what you reach for; you reach for that God who is, as the opening verse says, he is ever present; he is always available, and this is the God who is the stable center when the world shakes, when my legs have been cut out from underneath me, when we collectively as a society even feel like we cannot keep our feet, we look for somebody who is the still center, and this psalm says that is our God. He is our refuge and our strength. He is the place we go to and he is the one who provides us the strength to keep standing after all.

## **DAVE BAST**

It is no accident that Martin Luther turned to this psalm as the basis for his great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*; and that is that idea of God as a refuge. It is like you think of the great walls of a castle – great stone walls – and you are protected in there from all of the forces that would assail, that would attack, that would shake. The promise of the psalm is that God will help his people. The city of Jerusalem means much more in scripture than just a zip code in Palestine. It is a symbol for God's people. It is not so much a physical place. The promise is God will help Jerusalem; God will help the city; God will help his people, and that right early, as the old version says, or at break of day here when the darkness is deep but when the dawn comes, God's help will be there.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And Psalm 46 is going to go on to specify who that God is who does that; and we will look at that in just a moment.

*Segment 2*

## **RUTH BOVEN**

I am Ruth Boven, and I am here with Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Where we are, in this program, digging into Psalm 46; a great psalm of comfort. The first part of Psalm 46 just talks about God, and maybe that is one of the reasons why you can get away with reading this at interfaith settings with Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists, and people of little or no faith, because it seems just like, well, God...

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes, God as you conceive him to be.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Fill in the blank...

## **DAVE BAST**

The higher power, and he is with us. The world may be tottering, and your world may be shaken, and your knees are knocking, but God is here.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Somewhere there is a stable center, but Psalm 46 does not let it stay that generic for long, and it starts to specify this after those first couple three verses there. You mentioned just a moment ago, Dave, that fourth verse: There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God; the holy place where the Most High dwells. Well, it does not name Jerusalem by name there, but anybody from Israel reading this psalm knows that those are the code words for a very specific place; and therefore, a very specific God.

## **DAVE BAST**

Well, right; and that is specified even further in verse 7: The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. It is the God of Jacob whom we are talking about; the God of Israel, Jacob's name changed later to Israel, and *the Lord*, that pregnant word so important throughout the Old Testament.

## **RUTH BOVEN**

Yes; in fact, when you see the LORD in scripture in all caps, we are talking about Yahweh; about the God who is the God of Israel; it is God's name, and it is a name that Israel revered so much it was not spoken; they did not want to blaspheme the name of God.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Taking the Lord's name in vain had penalties that were on the stiff side, so the Israelites would just slip in a different word – Adonai usually – wherever they saw the letters in Hebrew yod-hay-vav-hay, but it is YHWH, from which we get Yahweh. We used to translate it as Jehovah, but...

## **DAVE BAST**

That was kind of a garbled...

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, that did not work so well, but it is the name that God gave to Moses at the burning bush. "Who should I say sent me?" and he said, "I AM," Yahweh, I AM sent you. So, we are talking very specifically about the great God of Israel, who has a very specific name. He is not generic; he is not just anybody's god.

## **DAVE BAST**

The great evangelical Old Testament scholar, Alec Motyer, says it very well, I think. He says if you ask God: What are you? He would answer: God. I am El (in Hebrew) I am Elohim sometimes – I am God – the transcendent one. If you asked him: Who are you? He would answer: I am Yahweh. I am the Lord. I am the Covenant Lord who has revealed himself to Israel, first and foremost, and who is known in relationship only, and that is the God who is with us and who is our very present help in this time of trouble.

## **RUTH BOVEN**

I am reminded of a neighbor of ours who – they did not grow up in the church, did not have faith, but had a lot of trouble in their lives, and they wanted to know if there was a God, so they decided to pray one night before they went to bed, and prayed that if God was real, he would reveal himself by rearranging their furniture; well, you know it did not happen; but it reminds me of this because they wanted their god the way that they wanted their god; but Psalm 46 reminds us that this is a specific god; this is the God Yahweh, who reveals himself in relationship with us; not by just commanding the mountains and the seas, but by being in relationship with the people and with us.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

That is kind of where the psalm goes. It opens with all those dizzying images of earthquakes and roaring seas and tidal waves and tsunamis; and then it says: There is a God who is a refuge; but as it progresses, it says: But you know what? When that is your circumstance, when you feel like your legs have been knocked out from underneath you and you are staggered and are tottering, you know what? The idea of god, a generic god, some lowest common denominator, squishy god who just fits all bills for all religions, that is not going to give you comfort. You are going to need to know specifically who is the refuge and strength, and it is the God of Jacob; the God of Israel.

## **DAVE BAST**

You know, most people's idea of God is the big fella upstairs – the great eye in the sky; and that is not really any comfort in a time of trouble because that god is so distant and remote; and what tends to happen then is people get angry with him; they start to criticize God: Why did you let this happen? What are you trying to do? What are you trying to say? Are you judging us? It is only when God is known personally, as he has revealed himself, and first to Moses – interestingly, that is not the first time that Yahweh appears in the Bible.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

No, it is used in Genesis.

**DAVE BAST**

And Exodus at the burning bush. It is used right from the beginning.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, so it is kind of anachronistic in a way because God had not given it yet, but...

**DAVE BAST**

But the whole Bible is written by the Hebrew Covenant People; the people who knew him as the LORD; so they call him that earlier, but really the great moment is in Exodus.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; and as we are thinking, too, about this very specific God who gave his name as Yahweh, we read that earlier, verse 4: There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. The funny thing about Jerusalem is it does not really have a river – it is an arid climate – so what is this river?

**DAVE BAST**

Plus, it is built on top of a hill...

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

There is no river in the temple, so what is the river? Or maybe the question is *who* is the river? It is God himself who is that comforting river; even ultimately in the New Testament Jesus will say: I am living water. It is God – God himself is the refreshing flow; in a psalm that talked about the roaring of the seas, the comfort is that God is himself a river of comfort, and that will go all the way through the Bible to the book of Revelation as well, to the great stream of the River of Life flowing through the city of God and the new creation.

**DAVE BAST**

And Scott, you raise an important point for us because we come to this psalm as Christians, and the God of Israel is also our God, but he is revealed most fully in the face of Jesus Christ; and so, it is imperative for us as we read about the Lord to recognize that this psalm, too, is talking about the Lord Jesus. It is not possible to read and understand and grasp its truth without adding the truth that we learn revealed more fully in the pages of the New Testament. We really want to focus on that and see where the ending of the psalm leads us as we read it through the lens of Jesus; and we will do that in just a bit.

*Segment 3*

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

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

**DAVE BAST**

I am Dave Bast.

**RUTH BOVEN**

And I am Ruth Boven.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

You were saying just a moment ago, Dave, about seeing Jesus in this 46<sup>th</sup> psalm. As Christians, we read this, not just from an Old Testament perspective, but from the New Testament perspective, and indeed, my faculty colleague at Calvin Seminary, Michael Williams, has recently written a really good book. It is called *How To Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens*; and what Michael does in that book is he goes through all of the

books of the Bible, including all of the Old Testament books and including the Psalms, and he suggests ways by which we can read these texts through what he calls the Jesus lens; seeing Jesus, seeing it through Jesus' perspective; seeing it through the perspective of Jesus as Lord; and for the Psalms, Dr. Williams suggests that the way you read the Psalms through the Jesus lens is to remember that God's ultimate desire is that we have a close, intimate relationship with him. Jesus modeled that best, of course, with his Father and the Spirit, but that is the way we read the Psalms. All of the Psalms are premised on a prayer life before the God with whom we want to have that intimate relationship.

### **DAVE BAST**

Yes, another way we can read the Psalms with this in mind, I think, is to allow the full meaning of that name to come out; the name Lord – the Lord.

I did a little book a few years ago, a collection – really, a Bible study resource – that I called *Christ in the Psalms*. The New Testament writers quote from the Psalms more often than any other book all the way through the New Testament, and they are constantly bringing out this truth that Jesus is the Lord – Yahweh is Jesus – as Jesus says throughout John's Gospel: I AM, I AM, I AM. And each one of those I AM sayings is an echo of that original, unpronounceable name – so holy that it was unpronounceable, but when the Lord explained its meaning to Moses, he said I AM WHO I AM. Tell them I AM sent you. And that is Jesus.

### **RUTH BOVEN**

Yes, and that I AM took on our flesh.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

A generic idea of God is not going to comfort any nation during a time of trial, or any people or any group or individual. You need very specifically to know who that God is; and so, in our Christian context we say: Who is our refuge and strength? Who is very present to us? His name is Jesus.

### **RUTH BOVEN**

That is right.

### **DAVE BAST**

What do you say to people who come and ask you as a pastor: Is God judging us in these great catastrophes – 9/11, whatever – is God judging America? We talk about Jesus being the Lord and being with us, but could there be a dark side to this experience? What do you think?

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

It is always possible, but I think even in scripture when people try to – and this is true in the New Testament, too – some tower fell on some people and some of the disciples came to Jesus and said: Were they being punished? And Jesus said: No. So, in scripture, whenever people try to – when people try to – now, if God wants to reveal something, God, of course, can – but when people try to connect bad things to some specific judgment, they are almost always wrong.

### **DAVE BAST**

I agree. I do not have any patience for people who say: See, God is doing this to America because of its tolerance of homosexuality. That is just bogus.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

I remember years ago, Rich Mouw, after that terrible earthquake in San Francisco some years ago, a church invited Rich Mouw, who was president of Fuller Theological Seminary, now just retired; they asked him to come and preach because they wanted him to tell them what was God's message in this earthquake? What was the judgment on San Francisco? Rich really did not want to play ball so he went to that passage in Kings with Elijah, and he preached on how God was not in the earthquake.

Actually, ironically Psalm 46 is a psalm of comfort, but when we hit the judgment button, we do anything but provide comfort as the people of God, or maybe we provide comfort in the wrong way in letting people be

self satisfied. That is not the comfort this psalm wants to provide, or the Bible in general.

### **RUTH BOVEN**

Ultimately, we do not need to fear judgment as those who know God and who know his love through Jesus, and I think that is what people want to generate sometimes is fear.

### **DAVE BAST**

Yes, exactly. You brought up that great passage from Luke 13, I think it is, where they are asking Jesus about this natural disaster of the day; the tower that falls, and he says: No. But then he goes on to add: Unless you repent, you will perish. So, the only message that is coming to us if we want to see a message of judgment is: Look at your own life and turn back to God. He is the Lord. He is with us, but you need to turn to him, too. You need to repent, and then you will find the comfort and the strength. Do not go thinking about what message he is sending to those people; think about what he is saying to you.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And that may actually tie in as we bring this to a close here with just about the last verse here, verse 10: Be still and know that I am God. Sometimes we want to respond to something by being busy and by saying things or guessing at God's judgment, but the psalm's tagline is *be still*; and what is harder to do than to be quiet when everything around you is surging and raging and the earth is shaking and the mountains are falling. That is a very difficult thing to do, but if we know Jesus and if his Spirit is in us, then it is possible to be hushed and quiet. I think we have probably seen that in peoples' lives as this psalm is brought to them during times of great crisis and fear.

### **DAVE BAST**

Yes, I also love the last part of that verse: I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. Whatever happens, God is going to reign and God is going to be glorified, and God is going to be high above over all, and then immediately it goes on to say: The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. So, it comes back to he is exalted. He will someday be seen to be over all, but right now he is with us.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

That is what provides us our peace, and the end of the psalm reminds me of that well-known prayer – and we can end with this – by John Henry Cardinal Newman – many of us have heard it: Bless us, O God, and support us all the day long until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over and our work is done; then, in your great mercy, grant us a safe lodging and a holy rest, and peace at the last.

### **DAVE BAST**

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee and Ruth Boven, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit [groundworkonline.com](http://groundworkonline.com) to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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