

Comfort in Times of Great Personal Tragedy

SCOTT HOEZEE

At some point or another, we probably all wish it were true, and every once in a while you have run across a preacher on TV, maybe, that says it is true. That is, some claim that if you are a Christian, God will reward you with a pleasant and prosperous life free of suffering. Again, we wish it were so; and yet, even Jesus promised us that we would have to bear up under trials and hurts and persecutions and – well, our experience as believers across the ages says he was right; being a Christian does not insulate you from hardship. So, what do we say when the worst happens? Where is God when it hurts, and is there any true comfort to be found when bad things happen? Today on *Groundwork* let's dig into scripture and wonder about this.

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 we are joined again, Dave, as part of this series on comfort by Rev. Ruth Boven; so, welcome back, Ruth.

RUTH BOVEN

Thank you; good to be here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are looking at a passage in the Bible that we read to each other when times are tough, and we are going to have a number of scenarios. We looked in the last program about facing an uncertain future. Other programs we will talk about what do you say when you are in the funeral home line, and so forth. But this particular program, we are going to look at what do we say and how do we make sense of it when something really, really bad happens? The deep tragedies of life; is there anything to say? Are there passages that we can read that will bring some measure of comfort when worldly-wise, earthly-wise, there is not much more to say because it is so bad.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. We started by thinking about comfort in general, and then the theoretical comfort you need if you are facing surgery or you are worried about your finances or whatever; but what about when you are in it? When you are really in the middle of trouble; when you are in the valley of the shadow of death or caught in the grip of cancer or your child has just left home; what then? There is a much-loved passage in the 43rd chapter of Isaiah that we want to turn to today. We will read it in a bit, but before we get to that, let's talk a little bit about the fact that Christians can and do and will have trouble in their lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, and we do – and Ruth, I am sure you have seen this and heard this, and maybe some of its cringe-worthy things – we do find ourselves in situations where we need to make sense of the fact that, yes; Christians suffer, too; sometimes horribly. And sometimes when we try to help each other in those situations, we do not always say the best things.

RUTH BOVEN

Right. Of course, Job is a good example of that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the classic example.

RUTH BOVEN

Yes, yes; people come around and...

DAVE BAST

What not to say to someone who is suffering.

RUTH BOVEN

Exactly, yes; and one of those things would be that you have done something wrong. That you have caused this; you have brought this on. God is punishing you for something that you have done or not done. What a terrible thing to say, and Isaiah 43, I think, speaks against that.

DAVE BAST

My brother was also a pastor, and I remember a story he told me once about going to visit a parishioner who was suffering with an awful cancer, and as he approached the room he could hear this man groaning on his bed, saying, "I deserve it. I deserve it. I deserve it." Maybe he did, but...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Probably not; but that is Job's friends, right? You are suffering like this, you are being punished. What did you do? Oh, my goodness, what did you do? We will talk in a minute why we have good reason not to think that way these days, but it is a place where people go. Other people – and maybe some of us from a Reformed background who have ingested a lot of John Calvin over the years – some people will say, "Well..."

DAVE BAST

Hey, you are not going to... wait a minute; you are not going to knock Calvin on me now, are you?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not ultimately; not finally. But some people will say, "Well, you are not being punished, but this is from God. God took this up and sent it your way for some good reason – building your character – but, believe me, this is God's will for your life." Some people say that.

RUTH BOVEN

Right.

DAVE BAST

Well, okay; I acknowledge that needs to be said very carefully, if at all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I do not think Calvin would say it.

DAVE BAST

But, you can go the opposite extreme, too, which is much more prevalent today, and that is to say, "Oh, God did not do this. He did not have anything to do with this. God stands alongside you. God is with you." We looked at that last time, the wonderful 121st Psalm: He is watching over you; he is caring for you; but he is kind of – you know, random things happen – the world is full of things and God is not really in control. He is a fellow-sufferer along with us. I do not buy that either.

RUTH BOVEN

Right. It was kind of a popular thing to say not too long ago. My kids, when they were in high school, would say, “Oh, that is random. Everything is random,” and I would correct them, “No, it is not all random. God is in control. We may not understand why certain things happen, but God is in control.”

DAVE BAST

My wife and I have a little joke; we usually use it in driving, but I keep talking about situational awareness – you have to have more situational awareness when you are out on the road – that has a great application, I think, for this kind of issue. If we are talking to a fellow sufferer, if we are trying to help somebody when they are in trouble, be aware of the situation. There are a lot of wrong things to say, and you can even say the right thing in the wrong way, or put an unhelpful twist on it. I think you just have to be very sensitive, and much more reassuring than explanatory. To me, one of the biggest problems comes when we try to explain things to people; or even to explain them to ourselves. Because even though I may believe that there is some reason for this or that God is still in control – Luther liked to say that God does some things with his left hand. He was talking about that awkwardness, where we have to put some distance between God and what has happened.

RUTH BOVEN

Between what we believe to be true. We may believe something is true, but it is not necessarily appropriate to say it. We do not always need to be speaking those truths.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am thinking about anyone who is listening or all of us right here know people who right now are going through a hard time. There are some bad things to say, but there are some reassuring things that we need to say. Maybe we cannot explain everything. Most of the people in the Bible, when they tried to explain it, God would later come and say: You got it wrong. He certainly did that with all of Job’s friends. He said: One, two, three, four; you all got it wrong.

DAVE BAST

You do not know what you were talking about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Job came closer than any of you, and even he did not get it right. But, there are some things we can say, and we are going to get to Isaiah 43 in the next segment of this program; but before we do, there are some things we can say. One is that, biblically and theologically and spiritually, we do believe God is in control. It is not – as you were saying, Ruth – it is not all random. It is not a random, out-of-control world. God is in control; that is one thing we can say.

DAVE BAST

Well, and I think we can also say that God does not relish tragedy or suffering. He does not want to hammer people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is outside of his creation.

DAVE BAST

I remember this in a very pointed experience. I was leading a discussion group one evening and there was a woman there who had a 3-year-old, I think, who had had leukemia, and thankfully, the child had gone through it all and seemed to be doing well, but she said – kind of exclaimed – “I refuse to believe that God gave my child leukemia,” and she turned to me and said, “Do you think God gave my child leukemia?” What would you have said to her, Ruth?

RUTH BOVEN

I would have said no.

DAVE BAST

That is what I said. I said no. If you put it that way, the answer is no.

RUTH BOVEN

Right; absolutely.

DAVE BAST

So, these are not part of his original good creation. There is a devil who is real, and sometimes we need to credit him with some of the stuff that happens.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God desires us to flourish. One of the main ways God has shown that, of course, is sending his Son, Jesus. That leads to one last thing that we can say here in a moment, and this goes to Job's friends, again; and that is that the guy you referred to, Dave, saying: Oh, I deserve it, this cancer. God does not punish us for our sins. There are maybe consequences to our actions; if we do dumb things we should not expect God to head off every consequence, but all – this is a point my colleague, John Cooper, at Calvin Seminary makes very forcefully – the Bible tells us that all of our iniquities, all of our sins, have been laid on Jesus. He has borne the punishment for us all. God is not in the business – for baptized people, now – for people who are in Christ – God is not punishing you for individual sins. Every time something bad happens, you do not have to trace it back. God does not do that. Jesus took it all.

DAVE BAST

Well, exactly. John Newton said, with respect to the cup of suffering that Jesus had, we have our cup, too; but the difference is, said Newton, our cup is not penal – it is not punishment – there is no wrath in it. Because the wrath of God has been satisfied by God himself, in Christ; and therefore, it would be double jeopardy if he punished us all over again for sins that have already been punished. So, no; the New Testament says of Christians and their suffering, it is a form of discipline; so that is quite a different thing than the idea of punishment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but, what is behind all of this conversation is the idea that, even for Christians, it is not really a question of if suffering will come, but when? That is where Isaiah 43 comes in, and we will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

Ruth Boven:

I am Ruth Boven, here with Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee. You are listening to *Groundwork*. Let's jump right to the key passage for today. I will be reading Isaiah 43:1-7:

¹But now this is what the Lord says, he who created you, Jacob; he who formed you, Israel. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name; you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters I will be with you, and when you pass through the rivers they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire you will not be burned. The flames will not set you ablaze. ³For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I gave Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. ⁴Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give nations in exchange for you, and peoples in exchange for your life. ⁵Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. ⁶I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not hold them back. Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth. ⁷Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

DAVE BAST

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word. We could sing that passage, because that is the basis of that great hymn.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This passage occurs in that part of Isaiah, which is begun in Chapter 40 with the great words: Comfort; comfort my people – so a lot of Isaiah was bad news; it was punishment for Israel; they were going to go into captivity, but now we have turned the corner starting at the 40th Chapter, and now we are in the good news part of Isaiah where comfort is the theme. Here also you get the past tense: Fear not, for I have redeemed you, God says. You are my children; beautiful words, as Ruth just read them. You are precious to me.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is also a passage about coming home because this is now the section of Isaiah when the promise is made that – again, going back to Chapter 40 – you have received from the Lord's hand double for all your sins – now it is time – make a way through the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make a straight path; this is now homecoming and God expands the promise in Chapter 43 to say: All of your sons and daughters I am going to gather; and not just maybe the ones who are there in Babylon, but the ones who have been scattered – just this incredible, beautiful image of the God who knows where each one has gone and where they have floated off to and now he is going to gather them all up. And on the way home, he says, when you pass through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you, and through the fire, it will not burn you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is significant, right? I have redeemed you. I am doing all of this; but even there, it does not say: If you pass through the waters; it is *when*.

RUTH BOVEN

It is *when*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are in a salvation context here. We are in a redemption context. We are in a good news context; and even there, God does not say: And because all of that is true, deep waters will not come your way. Fire; no way. Raging rivers; you will never see it. Nope, nope. Somehow it is always a both/and in scripture; we are redeemed; we are loved; we are precious; and yet, for whatever the reasons, which we cannot fathom, the hard times still come.

RUTH BOVEN

It is interesting, just this past week I met with a young woman who, within a very short time lost her father, lost her job, and lost her home. In this visit, I actually brought up this passage, read it, and when I pointed out to her that it said “when,” and not “if,” and talked about how we are not promised that we are going to rise above all of these turmoil's and storms of life, it was a comfort to her. Her eyes opened wide, and I think what it said to her was, “I am not punishing you,” first of all; secondly, “I am with you,” and also, “Everyone is going to experience difficulty in life. I am not singling you out to punish you.” It was a real comfort to her to think about it in those terms.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I do not know this person, of course, but we can imagine – and to some degree, we all have some deep waters in our lives – some fiery periods of testing – and I think, even though we are steeped in the Reformed tradition in my only comfort in life and in death; even though we theoretically know better, I think we all have a tendency when something bad happens to wonder, “Is this it? Did God cut me off? Is there no God? Or if there is, what did I do?” And so, to hear: No, no, no, no. The Bible predicted this. You are still in. It is like; Whew! Good to know, actually; incredibly good to know that this does not define me and this does not mean my relationship with God is over, because that is the big fear when something terrible happens, you

just wonder, “Where are the happy times I used to know when I felt God near? Will it never come again?” It is a natural fear, I think.

DAVE BAST

I think of something in this connection that James Packer wrote years ago. He said: God’s priority is character not kicks. One of the things we tend to overlook is that God is doing something to us and in us, and that involves shaping us sometimes through pain, sometimes through suffering, to conform us to the image of his Son. That is pretty clear in the New Testament that God’s goal is not just to get us through with as little trouble as possible, and as happy as we can be, but rather that he wants us to become more like Jesus so that, again going back to the first program in the series, we can comfort people with the same comfort we have received, and that, inevitably will mean a testing through fire. Peter uses that image in 1 Peter Chapter 1. So, the fire is not just that it is happening to us and he is with us; it is that he is doing something when the water is deep and the fire is hot.

DAVE BAST

So, Isaiah, as a servant of God who speaks the truth, cannot promise us that the bad times will never come, but he does make a lot of other promises, and we will look at those in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with Scott Hoezee and Ruth Boven, I am Dave Bast, and today we are digging into Isaiah Chapter 43.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we reviewed in the previous segment, Ruth and Dave, that terrible things do happen in this world and in our lives and in our church. Indeed, we are told that these will come. Isaiah does not say to the Israelites, and through them now to us by the Holy Spirit, if bad times come; no, he says when; and this is in the context of redemption. You are saved. I love you. You are precious. Even so, when bad stuff happens, I am with you. That is the main promise here. But what does that look like? Again, we wish we just did not have to deal with it in the first place, but we do. So, how is it comforting to know God is there? How does that work?

RUTH BOVEN

Well, I think that probably often works, or certainly sometimes works through community; through the comfort that we share because of Christ; the comfort that we are able to offer others. Someone comes to mind for me, and that is a woman who died of liver cancer, who went through horrific treatments and lost so much weight; she looked nearly like a skeleton, but as she did that, she was very comforted by this idea that God was with her in this somehow, and so she went through scripture and wrote down all of the passages that addressed that truth – that promise – gave that promise that God is with her. That alone was wonderful comfort to her to see how often that promise was repeated in scripture. Then secondly, she also frequently testified to the comfort that it was to have Christ’s hands and feet through other people; just someone sitting beside her. She was not married; did not have children. So, someone from the church to come sit with her and hold her hand; be near. That reminded her of those promises that she had written down on those papers, but could feel in someone sitting next to her.

DAVE BAST

One of my closest friends – this is now 22 years ago – lost his wife, mother, and daughter in the same accident to a drunk driver, and he – Jerry, my friend – was in the car with his other three children, who survived. Needless to say, it took a while for the comfort to come through, but eventually he wrote a book about the experience that he called *A Grace Disguised*. It was grace; it was heavily disguised; the waters were very deep, but God was with him and brought him through. That is the big promise: I will bring you through. I will bring you through to the other side.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as Ruth just said, we see that best in each other, right? I recall reading something from someone else's similar circumstance – wife and daughter killed in an accident the day before Easter or something – and he went to church and he said: I could not sing the hymns that day. I could not celebrate the resurrection that day; I could not even believe in it that day; but that is okay; the church believed in it for me. They sang for me until the day would come when, by God's grace, I could sing again, and I could believe it again; but in the meanwhile, the community believed it for me. That is just one example, or I have talked to people who have a very sick child, and the church organizes an around-the-clock prayer vigil. Somebody gets out of bed at 2:00 in the morning to pray for 45 minutes or an hour or whatever it is, and then you talk to the mother who sat at the bedside all night at the Children's Hospital and she maybe did not even know that the prayer vigil was going on, but she will look at you and she will say, "I cannot explain this, but you know, at 3:30 in the morning I just felt like God was right here. I felt like people were praying for me. Were they?" That is how it goes, that somehow not being alone and the community helping you, that is God's mini-incarnation. That is Jesus to us.

DAVE BAST

Well, we talked about the promises that are made here, and we said in this last segment we want to focus on them. Surely, the central promise is the only one that matters in the end: I am with you – Emmanuel – God with us – but there is also a command associated with that promise. I love to remember that, too. In Isaiah it says: Fear not, for I am with you. So, do not be afraid. We need to keep hearing that, also. Do not be afraid because I will bring you through.

RUTH BOVEN

Yes; I think, as you mentioned, Scott, being alone in something, facing something alone is a fearful thing, and I think the company of another person – and sometimes we underestimate the ministry of presence – we feel like we have to come into a difficult situation with just the right words and that that is going to make a big difference, but not so. The ministry of presence, of being with somebody, of sitting beside them, of being willing to go to a doctor's appointment or something like that with someone else; those are very important and powerful ways to minister to someone who has good reason from an earthly perspective to fear.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, to be afraid. It is so deeply Christian, right? When God decided to save us, he did not do it by telling us ideas through some divine bullhorn that he put to his lips and shouted out from space; no, he came here. His own Son; part of the Trinity of God; became flesh, became human, moved into the neighborhood, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it – that incarnational aspect of the Christian faith – that is just so who we are.

DAVE BAST

So, I guess the main thing I would want to say, maybe, to the one who wants to come alongside: Do not worry about having answers. Be careful not to say the wrong things, we talked about that. Just go; just be there. It takes some courage; it takes some strength to do that because nobody wants to have the pain spill over simply from being present, but if you are willing to do that, you can be a comfort, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Someone once said that in the book of Job his friends showed up, and for the first week or so they sat with him in silence, and one commentator said: That is when they were the most useful; before they started to talk. Just being there, that is the most important thing, and our God is with us in all of the deep waters of life, and he is with us through one another.

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Ruth Boven and Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com and tell us topics, passages, or ideas that you would like us to dig into on future *Groundwork* programs.

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