

Comfort When We Face the End of Life

SCOTT HOEZEE

Is there anything meaningful to say when life draws to a close? Or when people are persecuted, perhaps for being Christians, and when their lives are made a complete misery by the cruelty of this world. Is there anything to say that will not sound trite or namby-pamby? Well, the Apostle Paul thought so. You would not know it from reading his words, but a lot of Paul's New Testament letters were written from prison cells. Cells Paul did not necessarily think he would ever emerge from alive; and yet, from that extreme edge of life when persecution was real and death seemed near, Paul wrote some soaring words in what we now call Romans 8. Today on *Groundwork*, we dig into one of the most famous and most comforting of all Bible texts.

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 welcoming back for the final program in this seven-part series, Ruth Boven, minister of pastoral care at Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Welcome back, Ruth.

RUTH BOVEN

Thanks; it is good to be here again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we have looked at a number of different scenarios in this series. We have looked at Old Testament and New Testament passages that we frequently read to each other; memorize and quote to each other; that pastors read to people during different times of crisis. Today with Romans 8, we really want to look at when we ourselves are facing death or when someone very, very close to us is facing death, certain questions arise; certain fears crop up; and that is where Paul is addressing people in this 8th chapter to the Romans.

DAVE BAST

I really think it is about any kind of fear, and Romans 8 pretty well addresses that; it is the mountaintop, or one of the mountaintops of the New Testament. We get to the end of Romans 8 and hear these stirring words.

RUTH BOVEN

³¹What then shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him graciously give us all things? ³³Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who then can condemn? No one. Christ Jesus who died, more than that, who is raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶As it is written: For your sake we face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers; ³⁹neither height nor depth nor anything else in all

creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is, a passage that is so steeped in comfort, freighted with comfort, loaded with comfort that it is read at probably more funerals than any other passage. Paul is writing this to people who are under oppression. Paul is writing this to people who live in Rome; right at the heart of Roman Empire darkness, right at the heart of the city, from which so much persecution of Christians took place.

DAVE BAST

He begins with an interesting phrase: What then shall we say to these things? And you might think he is thinking just about the persecution and the trouble and the fear. What do we say in the face of that? Then he launches into this wonderful summary; but actually, he is also looking back at what he has just been writing at Romans 1:1 through 8:30. What do we say to these? What do we say in response to all of this? And all of that is the whole Gospel as explicated in probably no other place that fully. So it begins with the sin of the world and the darkness and condemnation of God, and then this tremendous good news that God has done something in Jesus at the cross that has dealt with that, and now we have peace with God, and up to Romans 8:1: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. What do we say to that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is all great news; it is all wonderful; it is all true; but there is still a hard situation. Again, the Christians in Rome knew that. So, does it have any meaning, Paul said. After all this good news that I have shared with you of the Gospel, and there is no condemnation and there is hope, what about your current situation of persecution? What about when Nero covers Christians in pitch and tar and sets them on fire to become torches for a garden party? What about when Christians are fed to the lions? In the real world in which we live, everything I have just said to you, does it have any traction? Paul says: Oh, yes. It sure does.

DAVE BAST

And he takes off like a rocket. There is just soaring rhetoric throughout these eight or nine verses, and it is as though he tries to anticipate all of the things that might separate us from God or separate us, maybe, from those whom we love.

RUTH BOVEN

Yes, and of course, you see a lot of that in church. Fear of those things that separate us. I think about parents sometimes who fear for their children. I think about those who are ill and wonder about what that final separation is going to be, either for them or for a loved one. Yes, fear of separation, I think, is a significant fear that touches all of us throughout our lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The separation is real, too, right? I mean, so when someone dies – as pastors, we have often heard it – sometimes it is six months, sometimes it is three years after a husband dies or something and the widow will talk to you in the narthex of church or in your office and will say, “Every once in a while I still have it where I say, ‘Oh, I have to tell George about this,’ and then I realize he is not there.” That is the thing about death, right? It does separate us for the time being from our loved ones in a way that is final. It makes you a little crazy. You cannot fix it. You cannot undo it. You cannot get to George. That leads to the other fear that Paul really wants to address here, and that is, does death separate us from God? Does it separate us from the Gospel, even temporarily? Is the separation we feel as human beings when we die – when we die, we are leaving our loved ones – and people who are very ill and are facing their final moments often say, “What I hate most is the thought of leaving my kids.” That is a real thing, but does it separate us from God? That is Paul’s big concern.

RUTH BOVEN

I think as a pastor that is one of the things I have in mind when I head into a hospital room where someone is very sick and there is the potential of death. I think about the fact that so often your mind is on so many

things and fears, and sometimes it is simply just caught up with the logistics, tests and all the various things that happen in a hospital setting. Then to stand beside that bed and to grab someone's hand and to invoke the name of God and to bring God down into that hospital room for them is a way that we assure them that nothing is separating them from God and nothing will. So, I guess a presence is again a beautiful way that we can remind one another that that separation does not happen with God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Ruth is my pastor right now. I am a member at Neland Church, and so Ruth, just two months ago this week you walked into the hospital room where my father-in-law, Isaac Apol, had just died, and you did not know he was that sick when you came. You did not know you were going to step into a family in mourning; but that is exactly what I think you brought and why we appreciated when you prayed with us. You assured us that we have just now – within 15 minutes – been separated from our loved one; but he and we are not separated from God; and Paul has some reasons why he says that here.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is a lot of almost arguing that goes on in this passage, where Paul is going to lay out for us the reasons why we can be sure that we will not be separated. We can give that assurance to one another by our presence because of what God has done already, and we are going to address that when we come back.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DAVE BAST

We are digging into Romans 8, especially that climactic last section of it, verses 31 through 39, where Paul really asks the question: Can anything separate us from God, and he wants to appeal not just to our emotions, not to our feelings, but to our minds as well, and so he gives us some reasoning, and asks some rhetorical questions throughout this passage that help us come to terms with what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they are rhetorical questions, aren't they? He really is not expecting an answer. He is going to answer his own questions. He is not really looking for information here, he has Gospel; he has Good News here, and so the questions he asked are just an opportunity for him to proclaim the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so, he begins in verse 31: If God is for us, who can be against us? There is the opposition; there is the persecution that he will mention later. This whole catalog of persecution trouble: famine, nakedness, danger, sword; all things that – most of those he experienced in his own life – and as if that is not enough, he goes on to angels, demons, powers, principalities; there is a lot that could be against us. But can that separate us? Of course he says no, that cannot.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is a divide there, in verse 35 and then in verse 37; there are these earthly things: famine – being hungry, being persecuted – so on the earthly scale, can that knock us out of God's hands? Can anything on earth knock us so far that even God loses His grip? No. So then he goes to the spiritual realm. Demons and angels and anything at all in creation, he ends up saying – no; so, nothing physical can knock us out of God's hands, and nothing spiritual can knock us out of God's hands.

DAVE BAST

But here is what can; at least in my experience, the thing that makes me most question and doubt is not something external, but it is the guilt that I carry around inside me, and so the next thing he says: Is there any condemnation for those who are in Christ? He talks about the problem of our own conscience – at least that is how I read him – that is what I think he is talking about. Who will bring any charge against those whom God

has chosen? It is God who justifies; who can condemn? Well, I can condemn myself, I do it all the time – that's who. So he addresses that. He asks us to think about that. What about our own sense of failure, our own sense of not measuring up, our own sense of betraying him – prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love – could that separate?

I remember hearing some Armenian say once: Well, nothing can snatch us out of Jesus' hands, but we can jump. What do you say to that?!

RUTH BOVEN

Right, right. Well, I think about in many church services where you practice confession, and that is it. That is hopefully what we are doing in that time is opening our hearts and admitting that that is something that plagues us; our guilt, our sin, our missteps; and then comes the beautiful assurance, right? And sometimes this passage is used for that assurance, that spoken assurance; that, no, those things do not separate us. They do not change how God looks at us. It is not anything from without and it is not anything from within.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and that is Paul's assurance here. If God says you are okay, do not say back to God: No, I am not.

RUTH BOVEN

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who is that condemns, he says. No one.

DAVE BAST

Christ died and actually is raised and is praying for us, and he is the one who will judge.

RUTH BOVEN

I think that is such a comforting piece to it, absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the core of it, too, right? Look, Paul says, the worst thing in the world – the worst thing imaginable has already happened, and that is the death of God's Son. God's Son came down here and we killed him, but it was part of the plan. Jesus went through death – a member of the Holy Trinity of God went through death – and that is why death itself, when we are facing our own death, when we are standing next to a loved one who is about to die and we have these fears and we have these questions about separation, the grounding of everything that Paul says here is that Jesus died and went through it, and through that Gospel paradox, through that death, we got life.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and here is another little bit of arguing or reasoning that Paul does with us. He says: Speaking of the cross, remember if God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, you think he is not going to give us everything? It is as if he says: Do you think he is going to waste the cross by allowing us to slip away from him or be separated or to condemn ourselves or to go off somewhere? To do that would be to say that what he went through in Christ was of no avail.

RUTH BOVEN

Right, to cheapen it or lessen it; yes.

DAVE BAST

And if he has already done that for us – it is like you inherit a billion dollars and then you worry about whether you will still get your allowance next week. He has already given Christ; is he going to withhold anything? No.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think that is exactly the point, right? At that moment when we face death or when we watch a loved one slip away, we do not look at that and say: Well, I guess this could be it. No, we say: What this person is about to experience, and when the time comes for me what I am about to experience, it is not some place Jesus has not gone before. He has already gone there; that is why God could not save us by remote control just pushing buttons in heaven. It took the death of God's own Son, and that now becomes our comfort. He has been there and done that, and so we cannot be separated from God because he already went through it.

DAVE BAST

And not only went through it, but came out on top, victorious, triumphant. He has roared through this descent. You think of the shape that Philippians 2 talks about in the great Christ hymn, how he went lower than low and than God has raised him higher than high; and that is our assurance, and that is where we will look next.

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

And we are in Romans 8; perhaps as we said at the beginning of this program, the most frequently read passage of the whole Bible at Christian funerals, and we have been seeing that the reason why is that Paul has all of this theology, and we were just saying, grounded in the fact that Jesus died, and therefore, death cannot separate us – nothing can separate us from the love of God because God the Son has gone through the worst of it already and emerged the victor. He is now the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings. Through his death he emerged the victor, and that is our great hope.

DAVE BAST

And his great conclusion: Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. It calls to mind just a few verses earlier – we did not read this, but another very famous verse, Romans 8:28, that says: In all things God works for good for those who love him; who are called according to his purpose. Sometimes we translate it: All things work together for good... This has been a source of unspeakable comfort for Christians.

I am sure we have all had experience of it. I think of years ago when I was a teenager there was a man in our church who was dying of cancer and the story was told later, I think maybe even at his funeral, that when the pastor came to visit him and prayed and then was leaving, the man held up his hand kind of clenched like a fist and the pastor asked him what he was doing and he said I am holding onto Romans 8; I am holding onto Romans 8.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even in that setting, Dave, that is why this is not stained glass stuff. Sometimes Christians are told that we are not terribly realistic. We are pie in the sky – it is easy to say the Apostles' Creed behind stained glass windows on a Sunday morning, but Christians do not do that. We say these great promises right in front of an open grave. That is a bold thing to do.

RUTH BOVEN

Yes, it is. It is, and it always strikes me as such a paradox, right? There you stand. I remember one cemetery experience where a young – probably 3- or 4-year-old was hanging onto her mom's hand and her great grandmother was the one who going to be buried. She walked – this little 3-year-old – walked right up to the edge of the grave holding onto Mom's hand, peered in, looked up at her mother and said: Is that where they are going to put Oma? Yes; into that terrible, dark, dirt-filled hole; yes.

DAVE BAST

Horrifying, really.

RUTH BOVEN

Horrifying, really...

DAVE BAST

From the mouths of babes we hear the truth...

RUTH BOVEN

Yes, yes... and yet, we read Romans 8, and I am sure we did at that graveside, and it speaks the deepest promise and the most meaningful promise you could speak into that difficult situation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is where we need it as well, right? That is why when we stand there and say the Apostles' Creed, and the second to the last line: I believe in the resurrection of the body – what we would say to that little 3-year-old is we believe Oma will not stay there. She will be raised one day. So, it is a very bold thing to say.

DAVE BAST

Or even earlier in the Creed – I have always been struck by the fact that the early Church believed it was important to confess our faith that Jesus was buried. He did not just suffer, die, and rise; he suffered, was crucified, dead and buried. Someone has said – it has often been said that because he was buried we do not have to fear to be because he has already been there and he will be there with us, too. As our bodies rest there and even decay, still we are not lost to him; we are not separated from him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is those circumstances of life where we need to grab onto this; and that is probably why there is something very interesting right in the middle of our main passage today. In Romans 8:36 Paul drops in what looks almost like a stray quote from Psalm 44; it is Psalm 44 verse 22: For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Sometimes when we read this passage we jump over that quickly because it almost seems to interrupt the flow; Paul is on such a roll here.

Ruth Boven: Sometimes we do not even read it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes we just skip it.

DAVE BAST

It is those three dots, the ellipsis, you know. Something has been omitted here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But Paul knew what he was doing plopping in Psalm 44:22, and you know what that something is if you go to Psalm 44, and find out. It is a psalm of lament, and it is one of those psalms where the psalmist is saying:

Hey, God; where did you go? When did you go off duty? I am facing death all day long; I am like a sheep in the slaughterhouse, and where are you? Wake up, God. Get moving. Fulfill your covenant promises. So now, Paul is lifting out this lament and putting it in the middle of Romans 8 as a way to say: You know the psalmist, asking God to do something? He did.

DAVE BAST

Right; and it is also a way to keep from reading this passage too glibly; as if to say: We are more than conquerors; wow, everything is great; I am a super conqueror; I am a hyper-conqueror – that is the word Paul uses – and nothing can separate us – tribulation, blah, blah, blah. I just kind of sail through. Paul says: Whoa, wait a minute; let's remember when you are facing hardship, trouble, nakedness, peril, danger, sword, persecution; it is really bad.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, genuinely so.

DAVE BAST

You are like a sheep in front of the slaughterhouse and you are helpless and you are shaking. One of the real privileges I am given just because of my job is the opportunity periodically to meet with believers from Iran who are living still in Iran and have not fled, and again and again and again you hear their story and you cannot even begin to imagine your way into what their daily life is; it is terrifying; constant fear, constant fear.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Facing death all day long...

DAVE BAST

Right. It undermines you after a while. It erodes your sense of security and personhood. Paul is writing exactly out of that same situation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is where we need it the most. Maybe we could just finish with a little story that I heard the preacher, Tom Long, tell some years ago. He was talking about a church he knew where when they did confirmation classes – what some churches call profession of faith – the kids who graduated from profession of faith or confirmation class, they would line up in front of the sanctuary and show off a little bit for the congregation. They would always have a memory text, and so they would recite it. One year the text was Romans 8; so the students line up in front of the church and the pastor went down the line to ask each teenager in turn – he started with: Jeremy, what shall separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord? And Jeremy responded: I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons; and so Jeremy rattled off a perfect recitation and everybody smiled and beamed. Jill, what shall separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord? And Jill nailed it. Carrie nailed it. Joseph nailed it. And then we got to the end of the line and everybody got tense because the last girl in line was Rachel, who had Down syndrome, and everybody thought she is not going to do the verse. Nevertheless, the pastor came up and said: Rachel, what shall separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord? And to that Rachel replied with but one word: Nothing!

RUTH BOVEN

Paul could not have said it better himself. And to that... Amen!

DAVE BAST

Amen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. We want to thank Ruth Boven for being with us throughout this series of passages on comfort. It has been great to have you with us, Ruth.

RUTH BOVEN

Thanks. It has been great to be here with you.

DAVE BAST

And thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and today once more, Ruth Boven. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and let us know.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/comfort-when-we-face-the-end-of-life>

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