

Faith and Anxiety

DAVE BAST

There is a jaunty little pop song that goes: Don't worry; be happy. Read a certain way, it might seem like that is what the New Testament says, too. Do not be anxious about anything; do not let your hearts be troubled; therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life. Those are all quotes; but for most of us, it is not that easy. Worry and anxiety can eat at us. What is a Christian to do? Well, listen in as we talk about that today on *Groundwork*.

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; and Scott, we are now at the third of four programs that are really addressing sort of common afflictions that we have; some of them physical, some of them mental or spiritual. So, we have talked about the problem of dementia and helping people—loved ones, if they suffer from that; or in the same way, those who might be suffering from clinical depression. We are going to address living with chronic pain and dealing with that in the final program; but today, we want to talk about anxiety or fear or worry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we do so, as in the last program so on this one, we are very happy to have as our guest Dr. Chuck DeGroat, who is a professor of pastoral care and Christian spirituality at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. So once again, welcome to the program, Chuck.

CHUCK DEGROAT

Thank you so much.

DAVE BAST

So, let's start out by pointing out...we talked a lot about clinical depression, meaning depression that is so protracted and so severe that you really need treatment, and that might include drugs or therapy. There is a kind of sense in which anxiety can be clinical, too, isn't there?

CHUCK DEGROAT

That's right; there all kinds of clinical anxiety disorders...often tough to figure out what you are dealing with. It is like a moving target, you know; and so, as a clinician, you are just trying to gauge it as best you can based on the symptoms you are seeing.

DAVE BAST

So we want to acknowledge that, and maybe talk a little bit about that, and how people can be treated; but we also want to kind of focus on ordinary fears and worries that all of us probably experience at one time or another, and what the Bible says about that, and how we can deal with those.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is a clinical dimension to anxiety that is beyond some people's control. I mean, some people seem to have been kind of born under a nervous tree, and they are just always sort of antsy and a bit anxious; and there are some people who were never anxious their whole life, and then, all of a sudden, a child died and the world went off kilter, and all of a sudden, they developed great anxiety about the rest of their family members, and every time they get into a car they are worried. So, these things happen; and there are some phobias and so forth that some people deal with; but right, as Dave was saying, Chuck, there is an ordinary, garden variety fretting about things as well, right?

CHUCK DEGROAT

Yes, that is right; I mean, we are not in control, and so we have got to live in this world in which we have limitations. We know from the very first story in the Bible, we have been trying to transcend those limitations. About 150 years ago, the existentialist philosophers made a killing around this, you know; the basic human condition is one of anxiety. We just wrestle with the nature of being human.

DAVE BAST

Is there a way to distinguish between the ordinary type and then the more serious sort of phobia?

CHUCK DEGROAT

It really depends on how it impacts your everyday life. You know, ordinary anxiety...you are going to be able to get along...you are going to be able to function; and we all have a little bit of that; but when basic ways of functioning in your life, in your work habits, in your family relationships and other relationships are strained, then we get into the business of diagnosing.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you made me think suddenly of a parishioner in one of my congregations years ago who wouldn't leave the house. He was so frightened and so anxious that he couldn't go out.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is important. I think what you said, Chuck was very important. How does it impact your everyday life, right? I mean, if you have a big job interview, you are going to have butterflies in your stomach...you are going to be anxious. If you have to get up and talk to a thousand people and public speaking scares you, you are going to be nervous; but you are going to get up and do it. You are going to go to the microphone; you are going to go through the interview. You know, the day of the big test or while we are waiting for lab results, we are going to feel garden variety anxiety until the thing passes; but right, when you cannot leave the house...

CHUCK DEGROAT

That's right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or if you lose your job because you are not able to be productive...you show up, but you are so distracted that you cannot focus, that is a different level.

CHUCK DEGROAT

That is a different level.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we want to be clear on this program. I think mostly we are going to be talking about...particularly in dialogue with the words of Jesus, which we are going to get to in the next segment...we are talking to things that kind of are in our control...things that we can do...ways of looking at our life, and through a spiritual lens that is within our control. We don't want anybody listening to this who struggles with real phobias and

paralyzing fear that requires clinical help every bit as much as dementia or depression that we looked at earlier in this series...we don't want them to think we are saying: Oh yeah, you can fix this. Just pray more. We want to be clear about that.

DAVE BAST

Or that you are a bad Christian if you feel this way...if you struggle with this. We mentioned this in the last program. We don't want to add guilt to the psychological burden of some kind of problem that you might be having.

CHUCK DEGROAT

I face this all the time as a pastor—as a clinician—and people expect that we will pile on with guilt. What is sad to me is that, as a pastor over the years, people will come to me and say: I got the platitudes; I read the Christian book: Don't sweat the small stuff, right? Just get over it; and I think what we are trying to say here is no, it's not about getting over it; and I actually think that our anxiety, our depression, are pathways to deeper intimacy with God. They invite us to wrestle with God, and so, jump into...as we said in the last episode...jump into that wrestling ring with God rather than going through a simple behavior modification process that makes the anxiety go away for just a few minutes, but doesn't actually invite you to deeper relationship with God.

DAVE BAST

You know, sometimes...I know with myself I have to try to discipline my imagination, because I have a tendency to always imagine the worst. You know, my wife is late coming home from some place, and immediately I want to call the emergency room; and there is a sense in which we have to kind of say no to ourselves in that way, don't we?

CHUCK DEGROAT

Yes, I think we do sometimes; and it is about being...as we will talk about in the next segment...about being very attentive to who we are and where we are in the present moment, and maybe that is something that we can get into next.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We want to talk a little bit more; we want to dig into scripture. Here are some things that our Lord himself has to say, and what that might imply for us in our everyday walks of discipleship. So, we will get to that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

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

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we are happy to welcome as our guest today, Dr. Chuck DeGroat; and let's dig right into scripture as we are talking about anxiety and the anxieties and the worries of life. Here is a very well-known passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6. Jesus is speaking here: ²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air. They do not sew or reap or store away in barns; and yet, your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”

DAVE BAST

²⁸“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow: they do not labor or spin; ²⁹yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe

you, O you of little faith? ³¹So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear?' ³²For the pagans run after all these things; and your heavenly Father knows you need them. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Which is a magnificent passage, you know...

CHUCK DEGROAT

Magnificent.

DAVE BAST

It reminds me of a story about a British guy who was asked to read scripture in his church, and he read the lesson: And the Lord said, and then he added: Quite rightly, in my opinion. So, yes, this is great stuff, but...

CHUCK DEGROAT

Magnificent, and one of the most misinterpreted passages, right? So, someone comes to you and says: I am feeling a little anxious today. Well, Jesus says don't worry about it. Well, isn't it more complicated than that? I think this is an invitation, as I said in the last segment, to live in the moment with God—to trust God for *this* moment. I have an old friend who once said the line: Regret and fear are the twin thieves that rob us of today—regret: looking to our past—ruminating about all the things that happen—fear: future-tripping—worrying about what is going to happen tomorrow—the twin thieves that rob us of right now. I think I was reading through one of N. T. Wright's commentaries on this passage years ago, where Wright said: This is about living in the present moment; living with God right here and right now and trusting that tomorrow will take care of tomorrow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I have always found this to be such a surprising passage; and right, Chuck; I think it is often misinterpreted. Jesus is such a realist here. So, the passage ends...so, you've got this whole passage about don't worry...don't worry...look at the lilies...look at the birds...don't worry...don't worry...don't worry; don't worry about tomorrow, and so forth. But then, the last line, as the King James used to have it, you know: Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Jesus uses the word for evil in there. He says each day does have evil in it; so, he is not even denying that our lives are fraught...that there is difficulty. We thought about that in the last program...

DAVE BAST

Each day has trouble, he says in the modern translation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there are things to deal with, maybe even be a little anxious about; but Jesus is saying: Remember the larger picture here. Who's got this thing; and that is our Father in heaven.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and also...I mean, we can get caught up in the beauty of this language...and it is so beautiful; and the metaphors, you know: the birds of the air... Well, if you have ever watched a bird, which I was doing, actually, last evening, sitting on my deck, because there is a robin that built its nest just above our heads...it's all over the place. It is not just sitting there waiting for God to drop worms in its mouth, you know; so, yes; there is some responsibility placed on us.

CHUCK DEGROAT

I think of the existential anxiety of the writer of Ecclesiastes, who is chasing after the wind, which we all know is an impossible task, right? One of those last lines in Ecclesiastes: Fear God and keep his commandments; which is to say, in a sense, and one commentator says: Fear God can be translated: Let go of control; recognize that God is in control. You cannot catch up with the wind; you cannot control tomorrow; but you can live your life right now. Put one foot in front of the other. We say this when we do work with

addicts...alcoholics; you cannot control tomorrow. Live one day at a time.

DAVE BAST

So, what Jesus is telling us here is remember the character of God...

CHUCK DEGROAT

Right.

DAVE BAST

He's got the whole world in his hands, as the old spiritual says; but yet, we have to struggle to really actually trust that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, I think that is right Dave; and you know...I mean, obviously you could be a flat-footed literalist with some of these words and do harm, right? If I am working in an African country where there is starvation, and there is a mother who wonders what she is going to feed her child the next day, I am not going to say to her: Hey, look; Jesus said don't worry about what you are going to eat.

DAVE BAST

Take no thought for the morrow, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Obviously that would misapply the passage. Where I think it does apply more, including maybe even in Jesus' day, and certainly in our own, I think he is really talking also about excessive worry. People who have food in the pantry, they've got clothes in their closet, they've got money in the bank, but they worry it is not enough; or you know, you've got a closet full of clothes and you have a big thing coming up: I don't have a thing to wear...maybe that.

CHUCK DEGROAT

Isn't that interesting? You both have traveled some, and I have, too, and you see people who have so very little, and there is so little anxiety; but for those of us who have so much...we are constantly ruminating on: Is it enough? Do we need more? We are comparing ourselves. This is what I said in the last program, rates of depression are going up. The more and more we have, the more we can compare ourselves to others; the more we compete, the more anxious we seem to become.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is another line I like in this whole passage, where Jesus says: You know, that is what the pagans are chasing after; as if he is trying to tell us: Look, you've got better things to worry about; if you really want to worry about something, worry about God's kingdom.

CHUCK DEGROAT

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And it is coming, and what can I do as I try to live into that?

CHUCK DEGROAT

Yes; I think of Luke 15; the older brother, who seems to be sort of the missing character sometimes when I hear this text preached on, you know, in the parable of the Prodigal Son...what is often called the parable of the Prodigal Son...maybe the prodigal God...but the elder brother, who is so very anxious...you know, the self-righteous elder brother who is quite upset that his younger brother has come back and a party has been thrown; and he is hemming and he is hawing. The father goes out to the elder brother and says: Son, you are

always with me, and everything I have is yours. It is just so striking, because the older son is worried about what the younger son is getting...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

CHUCK DEGROAT

What he will get. You are always with me. Everything I have is yours. You know, I think that line itself could probably save us tens of thousands of dollars of therapy: Everything I have is yours.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is, in that passage as well, Chuck and Dave, from Matthew 6, that we read, I think in the Latin it is like *a minore ad maius*—from the little to the greater—if these little robins that you are talking about...

DAVE BAST

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If God is taking care of those robins in the nest off your deck, Dave, how much more doesn't God care also about you as a precious child of the kingdom? Again, remember whose you are and whose world this is, right? We sometimes think we have to go out and create the world anew ourselves every day; whereas, God has already got it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I like to call that Jesus' favorite argument: the "how much more" argument. Look, if this is what God does for those kinds of things, yes, you are of more value to him than anything. You are precious to him. Talk about saving money on therapy, if we could only get ourselves to believe that...to really believe that. Who me? Are you talking about me? I'm precious to God?

CHUCK DEGROAT

That's right.

DAVE BAST

The answer is yes, isn't it?

CHUCK DEGROAT

That's right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Matthew 6 is a great passage, but there is another really great passage from Philippians, and we are going to turn to that in our final segment 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. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee.

CHUCK DEGROAT

And I am Chuck DeGroat.

DAVE BAST

And let's get right to another well-known passage, from the New Testament also, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, Chapter 4, where he writes:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again, rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God; ⁷and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

So, there it is again: Don't be anxious. Simple enough, right?

CHUCK DEGROAT

Simple enough. Just follow those instructions and all shall be well; but all is not always well, right? And we just talked about this a little while ago. Paul was in prison; and you know, Paul had quite the life, right? From illness to imprisonment to Judaizers on his tail everywhere he went; and just the chapter before, in Philippians 3, he says: In order to know the power of the resurrection, we will need to be participants in God's sufferings...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

CHUCK DEGROAT

So, there will be suffering in this life; and thus, anxiety.

DAVE BAST

Not to mention, he lost his whole family when he became a Christian, and all this stuff he had before: his standing, his job as a Pharisee, as a Christian hunter. It was all just garbage compared to what it meant to know Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, for Paul to be writing this, basically from prison, and he addresses that in the first chapter of Philippians...the Philippians even heard he was in jail and said: What did he do? And he said: I didn't do anything. I just witnessed to Jesus. But he is in prison. So, for Paul to do this, we know he is not dispensing pious platitudes or putting a happy face sticker over the top of people's suffering. This guy knows what he is talking about. Of course, for the rest of us, who *quote* Paul, we might have to be a little bit more careful that we don't turn it into that.

CHUCK DEGROAT

That's right; and the kind of joy that he is talking about here...maybe there is something to say as we go back to the Beatitudes about blessed or happy are the broken; happy are those who mourn; happy are the hungry and thirsty. We are talking about a different kind of happiness—a different kind of joy—than I think the sweet and saccharine kind of joy that we see in so many of our churches nowadays; where life is sort of lived on the surface. I think Paul knows joy because Paul has experienced the depths of suffering.

DAVE BAST

So, it's not ha-ha happiness.

CHUCK DEGROAT

No; it's not ha-ha...

DAVE BAST

It's the deeper sense that all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well?

CHUCK DEGROAT

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds me of John Henry Cardinal Newman as well, who said: Joy is never a first feeling; it is always a second feeling. Happiness is a first feeling. If something good happens, you are happy. Joy you only get to *after* the cross. You've been to the cross; you've seen Jesus die; and then you get the joy of the resurrection. The cross had to come first. So, happiness erupts pretty much everywhere you would think. We talked about this in the Fruit of the Spirit series. Happiness crops up where you would expect it. Joy can crop up in most decidedly surprising places, including funeral homes and gravesides, and hospice wards.

DAVE BAST

Talk a little bit, Chuck, about the relationship between dealing with anxiety or worry and prayer. Say a little something about that.

CHUCK DEGROAT

Yes; well, maybe a couple of things: One is perhaps my favorite book on prayer is Henri Nouwen's little book: *With Open Hands*. It is such a beautiful picture of a contrast between hands that are grasping after versus hands that are open in a posture of surrender; and so, I wonder how prayer can evolve as we become more surrendered. I think when I was younger, my prayers were so intense, you know; and it was almost like me trying to control God, you know; and as life happens to you, you recognize that there is a kind of surrender that happens in your life; but, there is a second thing, too, and it is something that Eugene Peterson reminded our seminary community of a few years ago. He said: As I get older, my prayers become more and more apophatic, he said; and some people had to look that word up; but more and more, my prayers become wordless. I am silent before God. I realized my words are sometimes just a means to controlling life and to controlling God; and more and more, I find myself in a posture of surrender and intimacy before God.

DAVE BAST

We shouldn't view prayer as a means of getting God to do something he would otherwise be unwilling to do. As if God were an obstacle between us and our true joy or happiness.

CHUCK DEGROAT

Yes; prayer as bargaining: God, I promise I'll be so good and I'll not yell at my wife, and I will not beat my kids if only you give me the better job...you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds me...what you said from Eugene Peterson, Chuck...it reminds me of that psalm that I am like a weaned child at its mother's breast. In other words, I am laying on my mother, not for what I can get from her, because I am weaned; I don't need my mother's milk anymore; I am just nestling into her being; and that kind of sounds like what Peterson was saying; and that, I think, Dave and Chuck, gets at that other part that Paul talks about: The *peace* of God...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That surpasses understanding will guard and protect your hearts and minds—that peace—that is such an important theme in the New Testament. Jesus talked about it as well, right?

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; I mean, just think of, again, the upper room discourse. We have touched on that in these programs: I will not leave you as orphans. There is the weaned child snuggling with his mother, as I saw my almost 3-year-old grandson do recently; and I just thought: That is comfort; that is strength; that is peace; and Jesus said: I am not going to take that away from you and leave you like a child without a parent.

CHUCK DEGROAT

When we talk about this peace, sometimes I think people get the idea that if we do this all right, we will live in a kind of perpetual peace, you know, in the Buddha pose or whatever they call it, you know; everything is okay, like: Ahhh. No; Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: There was sweat that emerged as blood, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

CHUCK DEGROAT

He was in anguish. There was a sense that Jesus himself, before the Father, was grasping...you know, was wondering about... So, yes; there is a kind of peace that emerges, only again, through the wrestling with God. God gives us permission to wrestle.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Jesus did all that about a half-hour after he had said to the disciples: My peace I leave with you...

DAVE BAST

Right. Do not be anxious. Let not your hearts be troubled. And then he goes out and sweats blood.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, that is part of it, right?

DAVE BAST

The peace comes when he says: Not my will but thine be done. There I go with my King James again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I like, Chuck, what you said...and you mentioned it earlier as well in this program or the previous one...the difference between Christianity and the eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. There, the goal is you meditate yourself out of an awareness of the world. We deeply engage the world, and yet find God's peace in the midst of it.

CHUCK DEGROAT

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Well, here is one last text. I want to just throw this in as we wrap this up. It is from Isaiah Chapter 26:3: You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. ⁴Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We cling to those promises of God in and through the troubles of our life, know that, as we have said, God is always there.

DAVE BAST

Thanks so much, Chuck, for your presence with us here.

CHUCK DEGROAT

Thank you. I'm so grateful to be with you both.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we conclude our series by studying how scripture speaks to us when we or those we love live with chronic pain or illness or incurable diseases.

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