
Faith and Chronic Pain or Illness

DAVE BAST

Eight hundred years ago, St. Francis of Assisi wrote a hymn called *All Creatures of Our God and King*. It invites the whole creation, including people, to join in praising God. That hymn includes a line I sometimes think about: You who long pain and sorrow bear, praise God and on him cast your care. Well, how can you praise God if you are living with chronic pain? How do you cast your care upon the Lord when you are facing some debilitating, incurable disease or condition? We will talk about that today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

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 coming to the end of a four-part series where we tried to address problems that people experience—they encounter—and talk about how scripture comes to bear on those things. So, we have talked about things like dementia and depression and anxiety, and now today we want to address the issue of the conditions or diseases that can afflict us and leave us really day to day in pain.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, people who live with chronic pain or with an incurable disease...a cancer that is never finally going to be cured...

DAVE BAST

Right; or things like migraine headaches, even, or MS or ALS, and all of these things...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Things that are very debilitating; and we are happy for this last program in this series to welcome Rev. Chelsey Harmon. Chelsey is the pastor of Christ Community Church in Nanaimo, British Columbia; and so, Chelsey, welcome to the program.

CHELSEY HARMON

Thanks for having me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Chelsey, we asked you to be here today because you, in the last eight or nine years, have yourself experienced a chronic condition that isn't getting better, and may be something you are going to have to live with for a long time. So, tell us a little bit about your story...about what has been going on these last eight or nine years.

CHELSEY HARMON

Yes; so, eight or nine years ago, I had a sports injury, and as my body was trying to heal from that injury, it kind of overdid it; and so now I deal with some degenerative issues in my lower back and spine; and I also have a hip injury that we are hoping can actually be fixed. So, there is a little bit of hope and possibility

there; but from that back injury, it is never going to get better, and there is not much that can be done about it; and so, I deal with pain on a daily...hourly...minutely basis.

But I do want to say something about chronic pain and illness. People's experiences are very vast and wide. Even somebody who has the same injuries as me might have different lifestyle or adjustments that they make; and so, I just want to put out there for anybody who is listening, it is okay. Your life experiences can be mysterious, and you are not weird or crazy for it.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and there is a sort of mystery to this kind of thing. I mean, sometimes people will experience just excruciating daily pain and there is no pinpointed cause for it. So, there is a tendency, I think, for those of us who are at least temporarily able-bodied, as I once heard it put, to look sort of with puzzlement at that; but it is a very real thing.

CHELSEY HARMON

Right; sometimes people ask you the question...

DAVE BAST

It's not in your head, yes.

CHELSEY HARMON

Well, what did you do that is different today than yesterday to cause you to be in so much more pain; and I will say I have no idea; and that is actually part of what makes chronic pain chronic. It doesn't make sense anymore. Your body shouldn't be doing what it's doing. It is doing something it wasn't designed to do.

DAVE BAST

So, whatever the source, or whatever the cause, whether it is a diagnosed condition or something a little bit more mysterious, what we really want to do is talk about, you know, how can you manage this: yes, maybe a little bit about that, but more, how do we think about this in the light of scripture, and the promises that scripture offers? How do we pray for others who may be suffering? How do we encourage them? So, those are some of the things...

CHELSEY HARMON

How do you even share with other people without causing yourself more harm or feeling distance from them? I mean, that is one of the things that I had to go through quite a bit, actually. As a pastor, I had all of these people who weekly watch me on stage as I get up to preach, who see me in pain, and they want better for me; and also, are these people spiritual example-setters? I am the person who is close to God, who they learn to model their own faith after; and so, if I am struggling and having these physical issues, and I am not getting better, some of them...I used to worry about this...would feel like maybe it is never going to be okay for me. I am not even nearly as holy as my pastor is; which, you know, is not a true statement anyway, but you get what I am saying.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, I think sometimes people also juxtapose the body and the soul...

CHELSEY HARMON

Oh, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And maybe downplay the body. And you know, there are those passages in scripture where Paul in particular often uses *the flesh*. He will talk about *the flesh*. So, you know, in Romans 8: ⁵Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; or Galatians 5: ¹⁶So I say: Walk by the Spirit and don't gratify the desires of the flesh; ^{17a}for the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit. So, that could almost make it sound like our physical bodies should be less important to us, but that is really not Paul's

point.

CHELSEY HARMON

Yes; so, perhaps a better image, which also comes from Paul, that is positive about our body is how he talks about the body as the Church...

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, that is 1 Corinthians 12, isn't it, where he develops...among other places...he develops this whole analogy of the body of Christ, meaning the Church, and the different members. Some may be suffering, others may be doing great. Some may be considered more exalted...the eye, you know, cannot say to the foot: I don't need you. We are all part, and the same is true of ourselves as individuals.

CHELSEY HARMON

Like even though my back...my L5 vertebra, for instance...is the part of me that is causing me the most grief on a regular basis, I cannot say to it: I don't need you anymore, so just get out of here. You know, I have to actually think about it as being part of me...myself, and my new life with Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think it is important to remember as well...you know, we never want to reduce anybody. We don't want to reduce ourselves, but we don't ever want to reduce another person to just their pain; or, you know, now that they have dementia, they are not a real person, or they are not the person they used to be...

CHELSEY HARMON

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Where, you know, in terms of our souls, our spiritual, our being made in the image of God...all of those things are intact and are so important to remember, because that also affects how we treat one another.

CHELSEY HARMON

And how we see ourselves. So, I am not, first of all, someone who lives with chronic pain. The most important thing about me, and I am really grateful to James Bryan Smith for his work on this, is helping me to understand that I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights, and I live in his unshakable kingdom. That is what is most important about me.

DAVE BAST

For all of us, it is a matter of degree, isn't it? None of us is perfect physically or spiritually. None of us is completely pain free...completely trouble free...completely disease free. We are all more or less affected; and yet, that doesn't cut us off from the joy of being in Christ, and Christ being in us. He doesn't only dwell in the most physically fit.

CHELSEY HARMON

Right; and actually, scripture reminds us over and over again that Jesus understands our suffering; and therefore, we can trust him in those things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is also why scripture assures us of God's sympathy with us, and presence with us. We have looked at Romans 8 before in this series, but you know, Paul has a number of wonderful things there. Romans 8:18: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed; (and he goes on in verse 22)²²We know the whole creation has been groaning, as in the pains of childbirth, right up to the present time; (and then also, in verse 26)²⁶The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

CHELSEY HARMON

Yes; and I want to just go back, because for me the prayer has become about that verse 18 image of having the glory being revealed in us. I don't think that that is just a future glory of heaven and when pain is gone. I think that is also the glory of Christ being revealed in my life in the here and now; and that can happen through my sufferings...my illnesses...my pain...the chronic conditions of life.

DAVE BAST

So, you have even said, Chelsey, as we were talking about this that pain has helped you; it has had some good consequences.

CHELSEY HARMON

Yes; you know...so, I live in Canada, and the medical system works a little bit differently; and one of the things that you have to do is you have to take some education courses on self-management for pain; and they bring in different speakers and healthcare providers; and one of them is a psychologist. She came in and was talking to our group about how you need to find your pain salvation story...you need to find the thing that your pain has given you that you wouldn't have had before. How has it made you a better person? And I thought...you know, this is a room of secular people...and as a Christian in the room, I thought: I know that work. That is the work that I am called to do because of the Holy Spirit at work.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think a lot of people who have lived with this for a long time have their own testimony, right? That salvation story. It doesn't mean they are glad they have the pain, but that they can see God working in it; but there is also that other voice in scripture, which those who live with pain now and then need to engage, and that can be a voice of lament; and in just a moment, we are going to talk about that.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

CHELSEY HARMON

And I am Chelsey Harmon.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A colleague of ours who teaches at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, who has incurable cancer is Todd Billings, and he wrote this book, *Rejoicing in Lament*, in which he notes this: Our affections need to become agile and multidimensional through being reshaped by God through the psalms. Let us grieve and protest and trust and praise together before the Lord. The psalms give us a way to pray in many keys, major and minor, while directing us to the source of our hope: the Lord and his promises.

Dave and Chelsey, that introduces us to that theme that about one-third of the 150 psalms deal with, and that is the theme of lament.

DAVE BAST

Right; which is praise in a minor key, I guess you could say. So, here is a good example. Psalm 13: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ²How long must I wrestle with my thoughts, and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over

me? ^{3a}Look on me and answer, O Lord my God; give light to my eyes... ^{5a}But I trust in your unfailing love. (Here is the conclusion.) My heart rejoices in your salvation. ⁶I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.

So, he begins with this lament...this cry: Why, how long; and then he ends with: I am still going to rejoice and praise you God.

CHELSEY HARMON

Just that verse 2: How long must I wrestle with my thoughts? I think that that is such a common, universal experience for people going through illnesses and pain. How long must I wrestle with why? Why did this happen? What is going to happen as a result of this? Sometimes I think this almost could have said: Why, Lord? Will you forget me forever? Why must I wrestle? Because we get asked that question from other people, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think some people really shy away from asking that of God. They kind of feel like it is rude...that we shouldn't lament...we should never question God. He sent it for our good, so you cannot complain; but the psalms...like I said, a third of the psalms say lament is not an act of weak faith; lament stems from a really strong faith.

CHELSEY HARMON

But I also think the asking of the question is scary, because what if you find out that you *did* do something that you shouldn't have done? Like, I think some of us are still working with this idea of a judgmental God that punishes us with physical things to happen to us; and that is not the picture of scripture either, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

CHELSEY HARMON

Jesus says very clearly when they ask him who made this man be born blind, his father's and mother's sin or...and Jesus says: No, no one's sin made him be born blind; but I think we still have that image of God that we have to let go of and work through; and I think that that is part of the reason why we don't ask questions, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I deserve it! God is giving me what I have earned.

CHELSEY HARMON

And the answer is right here from the psalmist as well. He says to God: Give light to my eyes; and light we could understand as: Help me to understand the true things.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

CHELSEY HARMON

Help me to understand what I need to understand. I think that that has been a part of my prayer life, and my way of lamenting is...okay, I have to say...lament, I sometimes tell my congregation, is saying goodbye to what was in sadness and sorrow, so that you might say hello to what God is bringing now; and be able to step forward with God.

DAVE BAST

Say a little bit more about that. How do you manage when something has happened that has derailed your life from the course you expected it to take? An accident leaves you paralyzed; a diagnosis says there is no cure for this.

CHELSEY HARMON

I just remember so distinctly, one day I was talking to my therapist, and I said I feel like I have lost the best years of my life to this; and she said: How do you know that? Well really, I was actually saying all of the things that I had planned and hoped for were gone; and what I actually was being given was an opportunity to actually say: God, what will you do now? I submit to your will; and not saying that God gave me the pain so I could learn that lesson, but saying I have learned through this experience that I actually need to hold very loosely to my hopes and expectations of life, because this world is unpredictable and it is chaotic and it is mysterious; and yet, I trust that God will be at work for my good.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he is in the midst of all of that, right? So, the great irony of the psalms of lament is that even the psalms where the psalmist says where are you God? Why are you so far away from me, God? The irony is, they are still talking to God and they are still assuming God can hear them. So, we lament God's absence to God's face, as it were, because there is that persistent belief that God is still here in the midst of all of this. I cannot figure it all out; I cannot figure out why he didn't deliver me from this or keep this from happening, or how long it is going to last, but he is here.

DAVE BAST

Right.

CHELSEY HARMON

And in the structure of the psalms, they almost always...there is only the one that doesn't end with a word of praise or thanks to God; and so, the reminder that we have to have that God is always good and doing good things in this world.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; so, we have been talking about prayer in the sense of lament and offering these things to God...offering our pain to God...seeking his presence...somehow seeking to discern what he may be telling us or showing us or leading us into; but, that also raises the question of how do we pray for people who are suffering? How do we try to encourage them; and we want to turn to that in just a moment.

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

And I am Dave Bast.

CHELSEY HARMON

And I am Chelsey Harmon.

DAVE BAST

And thanks again, Chelsey, for joining us on this special program. You know, often when we try to encourage people who are suffering in some way, we kind of struggle to find the words. Sometimes we just deal in platitudes or convention. How do you respond to that? What do you suggest?

CHELSEY HARMON

So, first of all, there is no foolproof approach to someone who is going through a hardship like this. We are all very different, and we want different things. So, I wish I could give you a quick answer, but there is not really one. What I would say, though, is there are some good things that you can think about before you even approach that kind of conversation. Empathy is a great place to start. So, you know, before you say

something, think about that person and think about what they are going through, and try to imagine being them; and then think about what you would say to that person...what you want to say. Imagine them hearing it, and kind of think about what their reaction might be. Then you might find that maybe you shouldn't say what you were planning on saying because you don't like the way it feels when you hear it...

DAVE BAST

Ah, yes. You make me think of one of my early rules for how to be a pastor, and it was...I told myself: Just show up and try not to say something stupid.

CHELSEY HARMON

And the other thing, along with trying to not say something stupid, is follow their lead. You know, I am somebody who doesn't really like...I mean, I know I am talking on a program with you all today about it, but I am not really somebody who likes to spend a lot of time talking about my chronic pain; but I really appreciate someone who puts a dinner in the fridge for me on Sunday at church that I can take home so that I can rest better and not have to do that chore.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think it is interesting, Chelsey, that we so often...you know, if we are going to a funeral home or we are visiting somebody in the hospital or we are just visiting with someone who is laid up or something, we think we have to figure out what we are going to say before we get there; and that is usually when we say something stupid; but you just gave a very interesting thing. Don't have anything ready to say; listen first, and maybe you are going to take some cues from the person in pain, or who is in sorrow; and that might prevent you from saying something that might work for somebody else. So, that is interesting. It is always a good idea, right? Somebody said God gave us two ears and one mouth. Listen first before you speak, and take your cues from the person in question.

CHELSEY HARMON

And I just want to remind us about something we talked about a little bit earlier in the program. Their pain is not the only thing about them...

Dave Bast/

Scott Hoezee: Yes, right.

CHELSEY HARMON

So, maybe try to see if they would like to do some other types of things besides just talking about what they are going through.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; they are a whole person anyway. Let's talk a little bit about intercessory prayer, because the Bible...the New Testament in particular...says quite a great deal about...there is a famous passage in James 5 that says, you know, if anyone is sick call for the elders, they can anoint them and they will be healed. Jesus suggests that if two or three agree in my [Jesus] name for anything, it will be done for them. Jesus says: Truly I tell you, if anyone who says to this mountain: Go throw yourself into the sea, and does not doubt what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours. Those are verses that a certain brand of faith loves to stress, but we pray for healing and it doesn't always happen. So, what's the deal with that?

CHELSEY HARMON

Good question. You know, I do believe in the power of healing prayer. I have seen it. I have had people whom I love experience it; but it is also not always what God has for all of us and each of us; and I think that trying to come to terms with that while being people who continue to pray is a really important part of the Christian walk; and I wonder if helping us to understand that prayer is not just one kind of way of praying. You know, like it is not just with the elders' laying on of hands and asking for God to do a miracle in that

moment, but there are other ways that we can pray for healing and restoration; that we can experience and still be people of prayer through healing prayer.

DAVE BAST

Maybe different kinds of healing.

CHELSEY HARMON

Right, right; so, I have learned a lot from the church mothers and fathers about how to pray for my own healing; and that has come through contemplative prayer, where I just focus on an image or a description of God from scripture and try to experience that loving presence of God through that prayer time; and that is a uniquely powerful way of knowing that even in my broken body the way it is, the glory of Jesus continues to shine through me because I know the presence of his love with me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is such an important and lovely point, Chelsey; that indeed, there are more ways to pray, and more ways for God to answer our prayers. We might pray for someone's complete healing and restoration. It may not come, and yet, that person, as you just said, might testify that though the healing didn't come, the prayer was effective. God made himself more plain and clear and unmistakable to my eyes of faith; or I had an experience of someone I touched that God's glory shown through me. So, there is more than one way to have these prayers answered.

CHELSEY HARMON

And I think about Paul when he writes the letter to the church in Corinth. We don't lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all; and you will only know that by communing with God through the Holy Spirit, and with our Creator...our Father...through the Holy Spirit.

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, let's be honest. Our outer nature is wasting away. I mean, the ultimate success rate of the entire medical profession is zero because we all die... we all die.

CHELSEY HARMON

Death and taxes, they say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; outwardly we are wasting away. Paul speaks a true word there; but that inward glory—that inward sense that, you know, two things can happen at the same time. We can be outwardly wasting away and inwardly growing and becoming ever closer to Christ; and I think that is something to wish for all of us; because indeed, Dave, as you just said, we don't have to have a serious chronic pain we can name to know this thing is going to end by my going to my Savior through my passing away, but God is with us.

DAVE BAST

Amen to that; and today Chelsey Harmon...Pastor Chelsey has been with us as well, and we are especially grateful for your contribution to this program.

CHELSEY HARMON

Well, thank you for having me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time when we once again dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

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