
Finding Comfort When We Face the Unknown

DAVE BAST

“A coward dies a thousand times before his death, but the valiant taste of death but once,” said Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar. He is talking about something we all do; worry about the bad things that could happen to us. Most of those bad things never do happen, but we still worry anyway. How do you handle fear of the unknown? What can you think about when you are frightened about the future? Let’s dig into scripture to see.

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 today we are delighted to welcome a third pastor to our *Groundwork* team for this series, Rev. Ruth Boven is minister of pastoral care at the Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Ruth, it is wonderful to have you.

RUTH BOVEN

Thank you. I am very glad to be here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Hello, Ruth; good to see you, and full disclosure that Ruth is my pastor as well; that is my home congregation, so it is nice to be able to work with her.

DAVE BAST

But she takes no responsibility for the state of your life, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, she does, but you know, every pastor needs a challenge...

RUTH BOVEN

Absolutely not.

DAVE BAST

That’s why we invited you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is right. As you said, Dave, this is the second program in a series of seven programs where we are looking at some of the go-to passages of the Bible; passages of comfort, passages we read to each other, or pastors read to their parishioners, believers read to each other, or some of these are even passages some people have memorized; that we say to each other at times of grief, of loss, of uncertainty. Each of these programs will have a little bit of a different angle, and so that is the theme of this program. Also is a particular need for comfort in an uncertain world.

DAVE BAST

We also wanted to invite Ruth because she is practicing the pastoral craft actively; whereas, Scott, you and I have moved slightly into other kinds of ministry, so we are not called upon regularly – except perhaps as friends – to offer these kinds of words, but Ruth, we welcome your experience and your ongoing work in this way.

RUTH BOVEN

Thank you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am guessing – again, we are going to be reading a Psalm in a moment which really addresses peoples' unknown fears of the future; and I am guessing, Ruth, that indeed as you listen to people, you hear that all the time.

RUTH BOVEN

Oh, absolutely. I think that often people are worried financially for their future. People worry especially about their children, and about their health. Aging people; what does the future hold for them? Yes, obviously, many concerns within a church about the future.

DAVE BAST

It takes real courage to stand against some of that fear. That is why I quoted Shakespeare's famous line at the top of the program. You know, you can allow yourself to go down that path, and when you go far enough it is really a kind of mental illness.

I remember a guy in one of my congregations who had agoraphobia. He was – which is literally fear of the marketplace – the Greek word *agora* for marketplace – he was afraid to go outside his house; just a million fears, real and/or imagined. I did not have the heart to tell him that it was just almost as dangerous inside the house; you know, there could have been radon gas seeping through the foundation or he might trip and fall down the stairs; but if you let yourself go too far, you become paralyzed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed, I sometimes think of Charlie Brown; on the Charlie Brown Christmas special he is depressed, as usual, so he goes to Lucy who has this little child-like psychiatric service that she provides. So, she lists through all of these fears: Do you have a fear of heights? Do you have acrophobia? Agoraphobia? A fear of people; and then finally – he is not sure she has ever got, but then finally she says, "Do you think you have pantophobia? And he says, "What is that?" She says, "That is the fear of everything," and he says, "That's it! That is what I've got."

There was a movie a few years ago called *What About Bob* with Bill Murray, who was afraid of everything; or Woody Allen, the comedian and filmmaker, Woody Allen has made a career out of being afraid of everything – just being paranoid; but taken to an extreme, it paralyzes you, but there is a world of uncertainty out there and, yes, you cannot exactly say to people that all of those fears are not real. They are real.

One of the go-to passages that people have when they face an uncertain future is Psalm 121.

RUTH BOVEN

¹I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? ²My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. ³He will not let your foot slip; he who watches over you will not slumber. ⁴Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. ⁵The Lord watches over you; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. ⁶The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷The Lord will keep you from all harm; he will watch over your life. ⁸The Lord will watch over your coming and going, both now and forevermore.

DAVE BAST

A wonderful psalm, and it begins with a question and answer: I lift my eyes to the hills; from where does my help come is the question, but it did not always read that way. I know we are probably old enough to remember the older version how that was translated.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, verse 1 did not used to end with a question. It was: I lift my eyes to the hills whence cometh my help. In other words, I am getting my help from the hills. It turns out, that is not the right meaning. The psalmist ends up looking beyond the hills to his true comfort of God; partly because one of the things that happens in the ancient world – and this, by the way, is a pilgrimage psalm. Sometimes a lot of people used to read this the night before you would go on vacation. I don't know if your family, Ruth or Dave, ever did that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the Traveler's Psalm, we called it.

RUTH BOVEN

The Traveler's Psalm, yes.

Scott Hoezee: But it really is a traveling psalm because this is something they would say on their way to pilgrimage to Jerusalem to visit the Temple. But as they went, they would look to the hills, which were in Israel the high places, and they could see the silhouettes of Baal shrines – pagan Asherah poles – and so the psalmist is saying it is a dangerous world; journeying is dangerous; it is dangerous to travel through the wilderness; there are robbers, there are lions and tigers and bears, oh, my. But I look at the hills and see what some people think is comforting – Baal – and I say, “No, my help does not come from those hills; my help comes from the One who made the hills, Yahweh.” That is the bottom line comfort.

DAVE BAST

I remember traveling once in the country of Bhutan, which is incredibly gorgeous. It starts out just a little above sea level and in the course of about 100 or 120 miles, it goes up to 29,000 feet – well, not quite – but it is the Himalayas just rising up the side. Everywhere you go as you look up if you are on the road, you will see on the high places these Buddhist prayer flags fluttering in the breeze, and people in the cities turning prayer wheels endlessly as they are – especially old people – as they approach the end of their lives and get more and more desperate for help. The psalmist is saying in effect there is really no help to be found in gods that are not God, but only in the God who is the real God who made heaven and earth.

RUTH BOVEN

That is right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Do you find, Ruth, in your work that older people who sense that their earthly travel is coming to an end – do you find that they reach for this kind of comfort?

RUTH BOVEN

Absolutely. It is sometimes surprising because you will have a parishioner whose faith you have always admired and think that they have a solid, strong foundation, and the end of their life comes near – they may be sick, dying – and they express those same doubts that you think for sure they have overcome in their life and would not have those kinds of doubt at the end of their life, and they do. Again, this psalm – I read it often, actually, in my pastoral visits. I find it to be a deeply comforting psalm; especially for elderly people.

DAVE BAST

And the psalmist is going to unpack a number of ideas of comfort, protection, care, watchfulness; and we are going to look at that in just a moment.

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; and along with us today is Ruth Boven, who is joining us for this series on the comforting words of scripture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Ruth, you just read in our first segment of this program, the 121st Psalm, and you mentioned that you read it a lot, and particularly to older people who are sensing that their life's journey – this is the Travelers' Psalm, we often call it – their own journey is coming to an end. It is interesting in this psalm, too though, and it maybe is interesting to bring this psalm to people who feel like their life is slipping away, particularly because the psalmist makes some pretty big claims in this psalm.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he begins with this idea of vigilance – the watchfulness of God.

RUTH BOVEN

I have also read it quite often before surgery. Dave, you mentioned, I think before, that that is the case for you as well. It is interesting because as a person anticipates surgery, and knowing they are going to be asleep, and of course wondering and perhaps fearful about what will take place, it is deeply comforting to them to know that God is not sleeping. God does not slumber. There is someone in control as they lose control; which is, of course, one of the biggest fears then of surgery.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and sleep in general. Speaking of Shakespeare, not to go all Shakespearian on everybody – *death's second self* he called sleep. We are totally vulnerable, totally helpless when we are asleep, and we can know that the God who cares for us never slumbers or sleeps.

You remember the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel challenging the prophets of Baal and his sarcasm, “Hey, maybe you better shout a little louder; maybe your god is asleep or he is on a journey or...” he actually even says, “Maybe he is going to the bathroom.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Psalm 121 says our God never goes off duty. And Ruth, you were mentioning often reading this before surgery, and there has been a time or two in my ministry when for whatever the reason I almost did not catch somebody before surgery, or maybe I caught them in the holding room, actually, because maybe it was sudden or maybe they changed the time of the surgery, so when I got there it was already: Oh, my goodness, they are almost ready to roll her into the OR; but I have often been amazed – and I know it is not me, it is the Holy Spirit in me – but I have often been amazed that when you go to someone who is on that gurney, you see the fear in their eyes, but then you have a prayer with them and whether you read Psalm 121 or whether you as good as read Psalm 121, it is amazing to see the relaxation that comes.

RUTH BOVEN

It is; it's true.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Spirit works.

RUTH BOVEN

Yes, the Spirit does work, and I think we are talking about this in terms of fear, right? One of our great fears is vulnerability; and surgery, sleep, other times in our lives we feel especially vulnerable, and this psalm is

particularly comforting.

DAVE BAST

Right; will I ever wake up again is the question. But, there is another set of promises here. He will not let your foot slip. He who keeps you will not slumber, and so on. The sun will not strike you by day or the moon by night. So, you think about these travelers again, of the psalm of ascents, they are going up to Jerusalem, and as they go through that hill country, the trails are dangerous. You could slip and break an ankle. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan; the robbers who beset this poor traveler on the way up to Jerusalem on that Jericho road – very dangerous – or the sun and the moon – I take that to mean, and I do not know, maybe you can challenge me, you guys, and my exegesis, but the sun representing physical illness or sun stroke...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sun stroke; heat stroke.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and the moon mental illness, because the moon in the ancient world was seen as *luna* and *lunacy* came as a result of the moon's influence. The psalmist is saying, "No, God will protect me from all of that."

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, here is the thing; this is one of those beautiful passages that gets counter-cross-stitched, decorates peoples' den walls all over the place; it is a relatively short psalm; many people have it memorized. The thing is that we have all ministered to people whose feet slipped. He is not going to let anything happen to you; nothing is going to happen to you, this psalm says, but that is really not quite true. People of good faith, baptized believers in the Lord, they have accidents; they get sick; they die. We pray this over surgery and they do not come out; they do not come out of the surgery alive. So how do we take these really strong promises – and this is not the only text in the Bible – but how do we take these really strong promises and make sure that they do not become rather the opposite of comfort for somebody, because they just grind their teeth and say, "My kid's foot slipped and he went right over the cliff and he died. What does this mean for me?"

RUTH BOVEN

Right; well, I think one of the ways, of course, to look at it is in terms of ultimate harm. I remember being at the bedside of someone who was in a nursing home, in the bed. I read this psalm and she had, indeed, slipped and fell that week and twisted her ankle...

DAVE BAST

Broken hip? Oh, no; twisted ankle, okay.

RUTH BOVEN

And so, we laughed. We laughed after we read it, but then we talked about what does that mean then particularly, and she said, "As much as I realize that God is protecting me day to day, things happen; and overall, he holds my life," and she was right. I think ultimately that is what this psalm is saying.

DAVE BAST

One of the things that strikes me about it – and we are going to revisit this problem over and over in this series – the problem of providence and how to understand that. No, as Christians we do not believe we live charmed lives; we are not living in this protective encasement that nothing can touch us; nothing can happen to us; ha, ha, ha, we laugh at all of you unbelievers. But it still feels true, and we have all been testifying to our own personal experience of sharing this, or having it shared with us, and believing it; and it rings true; it does not ring false, these promises. So, yes, as you said, Ruth, the matter of ultimate harm is maybe what we are protected against, but at the same time, I think that we all believe, despite the fact that it can be said at the wrong time and maybe in the wrong way that he watches over us constantly; he never lets us slip; he never lets us fall; and he does not allow things to finally harm us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In other words, this is one of many cases where you say Psalm 121 is the truth, but it is not a simple truth, right? It is not a naïve truth. We read it through the right eyes; we read it knowing that this life, this creation, is not all that there is in God's kingdom; and so, you take that big kingdom perspective and then you realize these words are truer than true, even in and through the times in life when our own travels do not end well or something goes wrong, it is still true. God watches over us and nothing ultimately will hurt us. So, when we come back, we are going to draw all of this together and make a few conclusions and apply this to the real circumstances of our lives.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

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

SCOTT HOEZEE

And today, Ruth and Dave, we have been thinking about Psalm 121 and the need that we all have to have this idea that in the uncertain future into which we journey – Shakespeare again, sorry – but the future is the undiscovered country, you know Shakespeare said, and we are journeying to that undiscovered country and we need the comfort to know we never go alone; and so we have been saying that whether it is before a surgery or maybe as someone's earthly journey in the nursing home is coming to an end and a new journey is going to open up on the other side of death, we need to know that we do not go alone.

This psalm, again, it does not mean that bad things will never happen. The psalm says our feet will not slip, but sometimes they do in the truth of life, but God is still with us; and so, maybe as we conclude this particular program what are some of the takeaways here, Ruth and Dave? What are some of the things we can say that this means; and therefore, why this is properly a very comforting psalm for people in an uncertain world?

RUTH BOVEN

Well, I think one of the things that it says is that God is concerned about us on our journeys and concerned about even particulars; small things, which also points us forward to Jesus' reassurance that we are important to God, and that we need not worry, and that we need not be afraid. Just that comfort, that remembrance that we are always in God's care and that he cares about what things may harm us.

DAVE BAST

You know, it is staggering to imagine this; that the creator of the universe, whose eyes are on the edge of all that is as it keeps expanding out – how can it expand into space that is not already – I am not a physicist, so I do not know – but this 14 billion light-years across, supposedly, so his eye is out there on the edge and his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me, that old Gospel song. So, he watches each of us individually; he protects us in our going out and our coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I heard somebody say a while back – I cannot remember where this was, if it was on television or if it was somebody I was actually talking to, or somebody who had been to my church – I do not remember; but having listened to some Christian people pray, or having listened to some prayer requests, I can remember somebody saying: Oh, for goodness sake; do you really think God is concerned with your back surgery? That we have to pray for your back surgery or for your Aunt Mildred's wisdom teeth coming out in oral surgery? You really think God cares about that? And the Christian answer to that, based on the whole witness of scripture is: Yes, actually, he does.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Jesus said even the very hairs on your head are numbered, and not a sparrow falls without the will of your Father. Our catechism, again, we have made reference to this before, but the first question and answer says: Not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven. That does not mean it will

not fall; but somehow that process, whatever happens to us, down to the smallest things, are not outside of the watchful care of God. They do not escape his notice; they do not escape his attention. He is not suddenly, oops, oh, I would have stopped that if I only could kind of thing, but it snuck in there when I was not looking, when I had my back turned.

RUTH BOVEN

When you have made something, and made something in your image, your love for and care for this object of your creation and love, you are going to protect. I have used an example in a sermon before about my kids creating these Christmas ornaments. We still haul them out. My kids are now in their 20s, and they made them in first and second grade and the paper angels with the little haloes made out of wire are falling off, but they still care about those. They look for those every Christmas when I haul out the ornaments because they made them; their hands made those.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And good parents who love their children – you talk about being invested in who you made as parents, but also in everything they make, right, that is valuable to you. Unfortunately, of course, that is not always universal with parents, and so forth; which is why I like the Bible passages where God says – there is even a passage somewhere that says: Could a mother forget the child nursing at her breast? And then the passage says: Well, yes, actually, she could. It does happen. There are some bad mothers in the world. But even though that happens, God says, I will not forget you ever. I am going to watch you even closer than you watch your own kids because you are my own kids and I am God and so I do not fail. And this psalm is saying I will never fail; I will not forget.

I think, Ruth, you were saying about older people near the end of their lives, sometimes even stalwart saints from whom you would never expect to hear a doubt, and then you do; I sometimes think that one of the things they doubt is do I matter really? I have followed my whole life, but now – my wife was visiting an older person just the other day who used to be active; he had a lot of money; he could get whatever he wanted; and he looked at her – he is in his 90s now – and he said, “The problem I have is all of sudden I realize I do not matter; I do not matter to anybody,” and Psalm 121 says: No, you do.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you do, right. That is something we all have to come to terms with because in the end, either we matter to God, which means everything, or we have nothing, because we will lose our relevance. Part of getting old is recognizing I will lose my relevance; I will lose my influence; I may lose my mind and my ability to reason, but the one thing I can never lose is the fact that he cares about me and he makes these promises to me. So, to me, that is the big takeaway; the ultimate takeaway from this wonderful Traveler’s Psalm, and I am going to stake my life on that one, I think.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the wonderful, wonderful claims of providence, and knowing for certain – going back as we often will in this series, to the Heidelberg Catechism question and answer one: What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I belong; I belong to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ, and nothing, not even death, can separate us from that.

DAVE BAST

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

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/finding-comfort-when-we-face-the-unknown>

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