

God of All Comfort

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the weeks following the tragic shooting of first graders in Newtown, Connecticut in December 2012, there was a lot of talk in the media about how to bring comfort to grief-stricken people. Several newspaper articles noted that the agnostics and atheists in Newtown receded to the background, even as Christians and Jews and other religious groups stepped forward to provide what those without religion cannot easily give; namely, true comfort. Today on *Groundwork*, we begin a series that looks at Bible texts of great comfort, and we will begin with one of the loveliest of such passages, 2 Corinthians 1. Stay tuned.

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 Dave, today we are beginning a series where we are going to look at a lot of the passages that are go-to passages in the Bible; things that pastors read to parishioners, that fellow Christians read to each other or quote to each other to comfort each other; to help each other during different types of tragedy; different kinds of suffering and hard times in life.

DAVE BAST

Yes, if I were going to give a name to this whole series I think I would call it the comfortable words – that is actually a little allusion – historically, in *The Book of Common Prayer* there is a section in the Communion service where they quote Jesus from Matthew 11: 28 Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest. And that became known as the comfortable words. That is what we really want to talk about, and these are all going to be familiar passages of scripture because they have been used so often in so many different situations; all the way from big, huge national catastrophes like the one you mentioned at the top of the program – that terrible Newtown shooting – all the way down to where do you turn in the Bible when you are worried about whether your retirement funds will run out or not? And everything in between.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so we are going to look at these passages, and we should note, too, that – not on this program, but for a good bit of this series, we are going to be joined by someone who is an active minister of pastoral care right now who will bring some stories from her experience and from the church into the conversation as well – but, we have all been there. [For] the practical application of this series, you do not have to look far. We have all been in situations where we needed to be comforted. We have all been in situations where we needed to say something; to provide comfort. Of course, as you just said, Dave, there are so many that all you have to do to find situations that require some sort of a comforting word is just turn on the TV or go to your favorite cable news outlet and there it is every day, the stories of the accidents, the storms, the shootings, the murders, the diseases, the explosions, the terrorist attacks. People every day, including a lot of church people and Christian people, get caught up in that bad news, and then there comes that time for the pastor, the fellow believer, the family member to say something, and what do you say?

DAVE BAST

Yes, what do you say? Well, as you point out, we live in a world filled with discomfort of all sorts and kinds. You and I come from a tradition where we value the Heidelberg Catechism, and many of us learn it as children, and that begins with a very famous question and an answer: What is your only comfort in life and in death? And those words were written, really, in the middle of the 16th Century when life was a whole lot more precarious than it is for us; when there were no safety nets of any kind; there were no medications for pain or anxiety...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or antibiotics...

DAVE BAST

People who really lived close to death and danger and distress, in addition to many of them being persecuted for one reason or another, and so they began with that idea of comfort or strength. Where do you find the strength to go on when something terrible has happened?

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think one of the reasons that that particular Reformed confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, began with comfort – and then actually – we will not go into it in this series – the Catechism weaves comfort as a kind of constitutive theme throughout a lot of that Catechism, and I think one of the reasons that that was true is because, as a matter of fact, God's word does talk a lot about comfort; there is a lot of comfort in the Bible; and I sometimes think that probably the reason for that is who more than God knows at any given moment how much comfort this world needs. At any given moment we know the top couple of news stories; we are certainly aware of what is going on in our family; we are pretty well aware of what is going on in our home congregation, but that is about it, and that is usually more than enough for us to know in terms of bad news; but God knows all of it at every single moment, he hears every single cry.

DAVE BAST

It is impossible for us to even to imagine that. Stalin said famously that one person's death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic. It is true for us. We look at these stories and they are people who do not mean anything to us and we read about – today I read that now they estimate 93,000 people have died in the violence in Syria – 93,000. Many of them were Christians. Christians have been targeted there. I read that and I think, "Oh, how terrible," but it does not really deeply affect me because it is a statistic.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But not to God, right? There was a Superman movie a few years ago where there is a scene where Superman, who has super-duper hearing, too, flies up to the edge of space and he looks down on the Earth and you can hear what he hears. He hears every gunshot, every crying mother who has lost a child, every cry of fear, and so forth; and there is a scene later in the movie when one of his friends startles when somebody calls out, and he says, "You heard that, but I hear everything." That is just a movie about a fictional Superman, but God can certainly say that.

DAVE BAST

I hear everything; I hear everything. You wonder how he stands it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You would have to be God to take it, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, you wonder how he lets it go on. Well, that is one of the problems we will probably struggle with in the course of these programs.

Here is the first passage that we want to focus on, and it is a wonderful section of the first chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians:

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer; ⁷and our hope for you is firm because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so you also share in our comfort.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁸We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹Indeed, we thought we had received the sentence of death, but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead. ¹⁰He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us ¹¹as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

DAVE BAST

When we come back, we will dig into those words to discover what comfort finally is, and what it meant also for those first Christians in Corinth, to whom Paul was writing.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Dave, just a moment ago in this program you read those wonderful words from 2 Corinthians 1; a passage where Paul refers to our God as being the God of all comfort, and then he really piles on the language about comfort in those words we just read. It may be, just by the sheer number of times he mentions comfort, it is in some ways the premier comfort passage in the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

Certainly, it is the first thing that came to my mind when we talked about this series and began to lay the groundwork. Yes, if you are going to do a series on the idea of comfort, you begin with 2 Corinthians 1. That idea that God is the God of all comfort – in one sense, you might interpret that as he is all comfort himself; he is nothing but comfort. That is not quite true. We know that God is many other things as well. Certainly, at the very least, we would have to conclude from that that all real comfort comes ultimately from him in one way or another. You can trace it back. It may come in different ways; it comes in different forms, but he is behind it all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and indeed, a lot of scholars, including in one book that I consulted as we were preparing for this program, said that the entire scripture, Old Testament and New Testament alike, makes it clear that comfort is, as one scholar put it, comfort is God's proper work. Maybe it would not have been so necessary had the world never fallen into sin, but at the moment we fell into sin and things went off the rails, God's proper work became providing us with hope and with comfort to help us to go on. In this passage, the one we just read, Paul, again tracing all comfort back to God – you can picture a three-tiered fountain – so you think of a big fountain – a water fountain you have seen in front of a castle or maybe in the middle of a public park, and at the very top of the fountain is God in Christ, and the waters of comfort bubble up and then they spill over into the next tier, and that is us, Paul says. We need comfort sometimes, and so God's comfort in Christ flows down into us, but then once we get comforted, our hearts overflow into the third tier of the fountain, which is everybody else in our lives. So, God in Christ comforts me and that allows me, then, to comfort you if you are in trouble, and it this wonderful, ongoing process of all comfort ultimately coming from God and

then trickling down to me, and through me to others, and through others to still more, and on and on and on.

DAVE BAST

Kind of like trickle-down economics – trickle-down comfort. That is what Paul says exactly in verse 4: He comforts us in all of our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Another wonderful idea here: God generally works through secondary means and through people; and he does what he wants to do in our lives through others. So, he wants to use us. He wants us to experience the comfort of his presence, but that often will need skin and flesh and blood and a voice and an arm around a shoulder. That really comes through us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the Old Testament, the Israelites thought a lot about comfort, and in future programs in this series we are going to look at some Old Testament texts as well, but when the Israelites thought of God as comforter, they often had two main images: God as shepherd and God as mother; that God is the one who nourishes us; who puts his wings over us like a mother bird protects her young.

DAVE BAST

Or like the Psalmist: I am like a weaned child who looks up to his mother.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, shepherd and mother were very key images; but of course, God was not usually there in person as an actual shepherd or mother. As you said, Dave, a minute ago, he works through others.

Also in the Old Testament, it is interesting that the Israelites experienced God's comfort through three main things: Through the word, through God's prophets (like Elijah and Elisha), and through, ultimately, God's chosen servant; the one that Isaiah talks a lot about. So, that was how God got his comfort across. You got it through listening to God's word; you got it through listening to his mouthpieces, the prophets; and you got it ultimately through his chosen and anointed servants – his Messiahs – and of course, ultimately there is but one Messiah. So that is the Old Testament, but then it comes together in the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

In the New, right; but you mentioned the servant in Isaiah especially. It is important, I think, to remind everyone that it was the suffering servant. In Isaiah, there is a series of four songs of the servant, and they climax in Chapter 53 with the one on whom all our iniquities were laid, and with whose stripes we have been healed. So, it is the suffering servant who brings comfort, and of course, here in 2 Corinthians 1 Paul says now that is Jesus; and he will also go on to say in this same chapter that all of the promises of God find their yes in Jesus Christ. They are all pointing to him and they are fulfilled in him; so somehow – we said that ultimate comfort comes from God, but it comes from God the Son, Jesus Christ, and the triune God, because the great word that is used here in 2 Corinthians 1, and used elsewhere in the New Testament, is the word *paraclete*, which is a word for the Holy Spirit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is the word Paul uses in the passage we read from 2 Corinthians 1; in the Greek it is *paraklétos*, which literally means to be called to the side of; you almost think of being called to the side of someone's sick bed or being called to the side of someone who is crying. Of course, Jesus is doing that now through the Spirit, which is why some people who know older hymns know about that word *paraclete*, which on my computer the spell check always tries to turn it into parakeet – well, the Spirit is sometimes pictured as a bird, but not that one.

DAVE BAST

But it is also the word in the old King James Version that is translated *comforter*; the Comforter has come. That is *paraclete*. It reminds us again – just to tie this together a little bit with the idea that God uses us – I remember the first pastoral call I ever made in the summer of 1976, and I was newly minted – newly

ordained – and installed in this little church in the countryside, and somebody was in the hospital and I knew, “Wow, I guess I better go there. I am the pastor.” I am supposed to make hospital calls on the sick, but I had never done that. I had no idea what really to do except I figured I had better just show up and bring a Bible along; and I discovered, to my amazement, that it worked. Just to be there and to sit and to listen and to share a few words of scripture; to pray with the person; and when I got up, they thanked me and they were comforted because I was the pastor.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You had come alongside them. That is literally what the word means; to come alongside, and to come alongside with a word of hope. One of the things commentators sometimes note is that the Greeks – the non Christian world – the secular world – they use that word *paraklétos/paraclete*, too; except that in the Greek world, in a very stoic, stiff upper lip, grin-and-bear-it tradition, what you would do when you went alongside someone who was crying, your main message to them was: Stop; do not cry. It does not do anybody any good. There is nothing for it. Suffering happens, so grin and bear it. Be a man. Well, that is the opposite. We think all comfort is now located in Jesus, the suffering servant; the One who knows what we are going through and stands with us in a very knowing way. As pastors and fellow believers in the church just generally, when we come alongside somebody, whether we are bringing over a tuna casserole or dropping a card in the mail or picking up the phone or going to the funeral home; as fellow believers, we are called to come alongside each other in hope because all of our comfort is located in Jesus Christ alone.

DAVE BAST

And as the book of Hebrews says: We have this great high priest, Jesus Christ, who can sympathize with us in all our weakness because he has felt it. He has wept at a graveside and he has felt the burden and pain of human suffering, and so he sympathizes with us – wonderful word, to sympathize – it means to feel along with. A great component of comfort is that – is sympathizing, but there is more, I think, that we can say as Christians.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it all comes together in Christ; and we will look at a few more of the implications and applications of that when we come back.

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

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are beginning in this program a series of looking at passages of comfort from scripture, and we read earlier in this program from 2 Corinthians 1, and I just want to repeat a couple of verses, or just part of a verse that we read earlier, Dave, because I think it really gets at the theological and spiritual core of where we find comfort, and that was in verses 8 and 9. Earlier, Paul was telling the Corinthians: You heard that we have had it rough; and indeed, they did. They were in a region of Asia where they were very nearly killed. They were convinced for a while they were going to be killed. Paul thought, and his colleagues thought, this is it. We are done. He would have been okay with that, but he had hope in Christ, but he thought they were done – but they were not, of course, they were delivered – but interestingly, he writes they had basically despaired of life itself, but then he says in verse 9: This happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead. And that, I think, is what we say to each other as fellow believers, as pastors, when we come alongside – as we were just saying – when we come alongside someone in comfort, the reason we dare do that is not because we have such great words, but because we are all leaning on the same God, and that is our hope and comfort.

DAVE BAST

Well, the reason that there is no real comfort anywhere outside of God, as we said earlier, is because there is no future anywhere outside of God. To have any kind of real comfort that goes beyond sympathy – we talked about how important sympathy is – I do not want to belittle that – but you need to have a future; where there is life there is hope, we say. Where there is no life, there is no hope. If there is no life beyond this one, there is no ultimate comfort either, or strength.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So Paul says we had to rely on God. There is a sense in which we had to lean on God. We could not stand ourselves; we were at the edge of death and when we actually go through death or have the death of a loved one, indeed, we have nothing to stand on, but we have a God to lean on, and if you do not have that God...

DAVE BAST

And not only a God to lean on, but on a God who raises the dead, Paul says. That is the key phrase.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

He is the God who raises the dead. So, there is a future.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We opened this program mentioning Newtown and the terrible shooting there in December 2012; twenty first graders and six other teachers, and just a dreadful, dreadful time. There was an interesting article about five weeks later in the New York Times, written by an atheist who basically counted himself among what they now call the “nons” or the “nones” – people who, when they take a Gallup survey and it says: What is your religion? They check the box that says: None. There is an increasing number of these “nons” in our society and this guy was one of them. He said: Really, the only thing you can say to people who grieve is, “Don’t grieve because your dead loved one can’t suffer anymore.” Of course, they cannot suffer anymore because...

DAVE BAST

Because they are not alive.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They do not exist, and never will. People who have lost first graders do not find that terribly comforting. First graders should not die. They never got to live. There is nothing to lean on if that is all you have is that they are nonexistence from now and for eternity is good news. Most people did not find that terribly helpful because it had no future.

DAVE BAST

There is this sort of stoicism that has been around for a long time and it was very prevalent in the ancient world that just said that you have to live with it. There is nothing more to be said.

I ran across a letter from the ancient world somewhere or other that was – I found it deeply moving, but yet in the end kind of sad. It was written by a mother to a couple of friends who had lost a child, and this mother had herself lost a child, and it went something like this: I weep with you as I did when I lost my own Didymus, but really, in the face of such things, there is nothing one can do, so comfort one another.

SCOTT HOEZEE

With what?

DAVE BAST

Yes, with what? If there is nothing you can do in the face of death; if there is nothing you can ultimately say, it is nice to try to express sympathy, but there is no real comfort in that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I seem to recall a quote a while back that says: When the old die they leave behind memories, and when the young die they leave behind dreams. The point being, you have the sense that you want your loved one – be they old or young, but certainly when they are young or younger – you want them to be able somehow to go on.

It was interesting to me that in that same edition of the New York Times that had that article by the guy who said the best comfort is to tell people they cannot suffer anymore because they winked out of existence forever... In that same issue they had a retrospective of all the famous people who had died during 2012; one of them was the children's book author, Maurice Sendak – *Where the Wild Things Are*

DAVE BAST

Where the Wild Things Are, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Sendak had lost a brother whom he was very close to quite some years ago, and very near the end of his own life Maurice Sendak was on the radio – and he was an atheist, or an agnostic at least – but I think Sendak would have called himself an atheist, but he said – on this radio program he said, “I do not believe in an afterlife, but I fully expect to see my brother again.” Well, how do those two things go together?!

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. Explain that one. But it testifies to one of the deepest convictions and needs we have as human beings and that is to believe that somehow, somewhere, we survive this life; that there is more. There is that great phrase from the book of Ecclesiastes, where it says: He has put eternity in their hearts. And I just do not think that we can easily deny that. That there is an ingrained sense of eternity that has survived all of the catastrophes of the fall and all of the terrible things that happen, and all the things that would batter our faith and our hope in God; deep down inside somehow we still believe that there is something there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Christians can put a name to it, and it is Jesus Christ. The God of all comfort, of our Lord Jesus Christ, as Paul put it, in this passage we have looked at from 2 Corinthians 1; He is the source of the hope, the One who raises the dead; who is on the other side of death for us. We can put a name to it. We have that intuition, too; but unlike people with no faith, we know the name of our comfort, and it is Jesus Christ our Lord.

DAVE BAST

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

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/god-of-all-comfort>

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