

I Belong: Therefore, He Watches Over Me

DAVE BAST

I think most of us have had, at one time or another, this sort of experience: Maybe we narrowly avoided an accident on the road; or maybe we were in an accident, but we escaped serious injury; or we almost made a really bad decision, but just stopped in time; or we did make a bad decision, but it didn't cost us as much as we were afraid of. We look back and we say: Whew, I guess someone was watching over me. Well, for Christians, someone is; and we will dig into 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 we are now at the third of four programs, where we are digging into scripture, but scripture as it is organized in one of the great confessions of the Reformed Church, the Heidelberg Catechism.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and particularly, we have taken a well-known...in many circles well known...the first question and answer of that Heidelberg Catechism as kind of a lens through which to read scripture. We have used the image that it is kind of like our gateway into scripture; and the question famously is: What is your only comfort in life and in death? So for, on the first two programs of this four-part series, we have seen that the answer is that I am not my own, but I belong, body and soul, life and death, to Jesus. We belong; we belong to Jesus if we have been saved by grace and through our faith; and we belong, as we saw in the previous program, because he has fully paid for all of our sins; and what did he pay for us with? Well, not money—not gold—his own precious blood; and because of that we have been set free from the tyranny of the devil; we have been set free from the fear of death having the last word on us.

DAVE BAST

Or condemnation, right; so really, these phrases from this first question and answer are a way of summarizing the whole Gospel...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

The whole New Testament message. So, we start right off the bat in a world that is often filled with trouble or pain, a world that can frighten us...and we are going to speak about that even more today...the fears that may face us as we go through life. We derive strength from the fact that we do not belong just to ourselves. We are not alone; we belong, body and soul, to Jesus, not only in life, but in death; and he will kind of see us through—he will carry us through; and we belong for a double reason. Not just because God created us, but because God, through his Son, has ransomed us—he has redeemed us—he has paid for us—we are bought and paid for, so to speak.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and all of that is in some sense...can be stated, as you just did, Dave, kind of in the past tense: once and done. Jesus died on the cross, we were justified—kind of a once and done deal; but, this same Lord's Day reminds us of another major theme in the New Testament, and that is there is an ongoing aspect to this belonging. Yes, we will be kept with Christ even when we die, but in the meantime, and while we still live here on this earth, we are told this in question-and-answer one: God also watches over me—or Jesus also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven. In fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is a wonderful addition, and it also has great scriptural overtones. I remember, Scott, in one of my pastorates that there was a man in our church who was afraid to leave his house; and he actually had a kind of illness called agoraphobia, which means the fear of open places, or the fear of the public...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You know, he would dwell on all the terrible things that could happen—the accidents that might befall. Crowds scared him...disease...all that kind of thing. I wanted to kind of remind him...I didn't because I didn't think it would be kind, but there is almost as much danger in your own house, you know. You can slip in the bathtub, you can fall down the stairs, the house could catch fire, there could be radon leaking and giving you cancer; so, life is terribly scary, and most of the time I think we get by...healthy people get by by not dwelling on that too much—you don't want an overactive imagination; but for Bible folk, there is this wonderful truth that we don't have to walk in fear because God is watching over us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; theologically speaking, we are entering the area called providence...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we have thought about providence on other *Groundwork* programs, and we have thought about how does this work out? We will be thinking about it more in this program. It is such an important area of biblical theology, such an important part of life...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Everyday life, precisely for people like the man you were just describing; and all of us who live with fears and anxieties, who wonder: Boy, you know, it is a dangerous world there. You know, you can go to the mall and there could be a mass shooting the day you are there. You get on an airplane, it could crash...

DAVE BAST

Or we fear for our kids or our grandkids.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even more, right?

DAVE BAST

Then our imagination really starts running.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You send them off to school, and there again, these days, oh, my goodness; I mean, look at some of the terrible things that have been happening in schools. So, are we just on our own? Is it just sort of a game of luck and chance, and take your chances? Go out into society and, you know, see what happens; or is somebody watching out? The Catechism has said, as the New Testament says, of course somebody is watching out for us. Jesus talked about this in Matthew 10:

²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny (Jesus said); yet, not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰Even the hairs of your head are all counted; ³¹so, don't be afraid. You are of more value than many sparrows.

Jesus said that to his followers.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; you know, that is a great verse. The translation that we chose here to read...the English translation...is literal, because what Jesus says is: Not a sparrow can fall to the ground...and by implication, not a hair can fall from your head down to the minutest detail of your life, apart from your Father; and sometimes translators have added: Apart from the *will* of your Father...or without the *permission* of your Father; but, all Jesus says is it cannot happen apart from the Father. The Father is still watching, even if these things do happen, and that is part of the heart of what we believe about providence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And actually, since we are thinking about the Heidelberg Catechism in this series, a little later in that same Catechism...I think it is about question-and-answer 27, there is a direct question: What do you mean when you are talking about providence? You know, catechisms are always asking common sense questions; so, you know, you hear Christians talking about providence...it says: What do you mean by providence?

DAVE BAST

What is providence, anyway? Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, the answer comes...and this also for people who have ever heard of the Catechism, this is a pretty well-known answer, although it does have some implications that we are going to wonder about in the next segment, but providence...this is the definition: Providence is the almighty and ever-present power of God, by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures; and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us, not by chance, but from his fatherly hand.

DAVE BAST

And that is a beautiful answer. I find myself...my heart beats a little quicker...my face looks up when I hear those beautiful words that I have heard since childhood; and I believe they are completely true, but they are not without a bit of a problem, maybe a big problem, because what we are saying is the good and the bad come to us from God's fatherly hand, but they do not really come to us in the same way, from his fatherly hand; and so we have to say a little bit more than this to flesh it out, and we will do that next.

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. So, we are talking about the doctrine of providence. We have been citing the Heidelberg Catechism, these beautiful words that describe God's watchful care over us. We mentioned Jesus' assurance that nothing can happen in the world, not even the smallest thing in our lives apart from God the Father's care; but let's look now at scripture; and I think one of the most beautiful expressions of this idea of God's watchful care is found in the 121st Psalm. So, let's listen to that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where will my help come? ²My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. ³He will not let your foot be moved; he who holds you will not slumber. ⁴He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

DAVE BAST

⁵The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. ⁶The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night. ⁷The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. ⁸The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Many of us are familiar with this psalm. Some of us maybe remember that Mom or Dad would read this on the night before the family vacation...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right...the travelers' psalm, we call it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The travelers psalm; and it is, I think; it is one of the psalms of assent. It was one of the psalms that the pilgrims would recite when they traveled to Jerusalem for Passover.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, yes; right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It was a travelers' psalm even originally, for people who were literally hitting the road and heading to Jerusalem.

DAVE BAST

And I am sure you have done this, too, Scott, but as a pastor I would often read this psalm with someone who was facing surgery...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And just remind them: You know, God never slumbers nor sleeps; so, you will be knocked out—you will be senseless, but the Lord will be watching over you still. So, whether we are aware of it or not, wherever we go, coming and going, by day, by night...just a beautiful scriptural word.

SCOTT HOEZEE

By the way, people who pay close attention to Bible translations might notice that the more recent translations have changed the first verse of this psalm into a question. It used to be: I lift up my eyes to the hills from whence comes my help. In other words, the hill is the source of your strength; but most scholars

think that is wrong. Now, it says: I lift up my eyes to the hills, but where does my help come from? Because what did they see when they lifted their eyes up to the hills? They saw all of the pagan shrines to Baal...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And to false gods; so they are saying: We are on our way to worship the true God in Jerusalem. Our help does not come from those gods of the hills...

DAVE BAST

No.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are from the true God, who made the hills and made the heavens and the earth; but it is a psalm that does make...sort of like that part of the Catechism we quoted near the end of the first part of this program, Dave...it makes what sounds like a blank check promise...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Nothing bad is going to happen to you! But Christian experience says: But bad things do happen to perfectly good Christians.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; it seems to promise too much almost, in a way. You know, another thing from the psalmist's worldview, or his setting, he says: The sun will not strike you by day. I think we can get that, you know, because it was the desert, it was a hot place, and when you are marching along, you know, sun stroke or heat stroke could be a real threat, but what does he mean when he says: The moon won't strike you by night? Well, a lot of people in the ancient world believed that the moon had a power over the human mind, or the human spirit; and in fact, we still talk about lunatics and lunacy...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, from lunar.

DAVE BAST

And that comes from lunar or moon; so, what he is really saying is: You know, you will never get any kind of physical problem, and you won't get any mental trouble. God is going to just shield and protect you from all that. Really? We say, wait a minute; we could all name loved ones—maybe ourselves—who have struggled with mental illness, or who have had physical disease or disability...

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, we did a series on *Groundwork*...a pretty big series...on Job, and this is the classic question of Job: If God takes care of you always, and never lets harm come to his true believers, well, therefore, if harm comes to you, you are not a true believer. That is what Job's friends said: You must have sinned, and God is punishing you; so, fess up and be quiet about it. Job did not agree with that, and in the end neither did God; but yes, so there is that question: If providence is true, and if we want to embrace statements as strong as Psalm 121, or question-and-answer 27 from the Catechism, that everything, even sickness and poverty, comes to us, not by chance, but from his fatherly hand, how do we figure that out? I think Christians have wrestled with this to say two things, right? One is ultimately no harm will come to you. God's got you in life and in death. Nothing bad that happens to you in this world, even your ultimate death, is going to have the

last word on you. So, there is that big overarching sense of providence; but there is also the more micro-sense of providence that God does take care of you; he is taking care of you; but unless God wants to turn us all into puppets, and have the whole world be a prewritten script that can only play out one way, then there is a certain amount of chance and randomness built in. God cannot head off everything without turning us into the very kinds of puppets he does not want us to be...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, overall, God's got this thing, but sometimes people make bad choices, or you know, make foolish choices sometimes, and consequences follow; but that does not mean providence has gone off duty, it just means God is sustaining you through that; and that kind of reminds me of Romans 8.

DAVE BAST

Well, exactly; you know, the Catechism, in the section we are looking at today, hints at that, too. It says he also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head apart from my Father, that is the Jesus quote, but then it adds; In fact, all things must work together for my salvation; and that is right out of Romans 8:28, one of the great verses that Christians hold onto in times of trouble or suffering: All things work together for good to those who love him, who are called according to his purpose; or it could be translated: In all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

So, as you said, Scott, ultimately, he will deliver us from everything, and he will deliver us into his future for us, which is to be made like Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and I think pastorally we always need to speak this word: All things might work together for our good *in the long run*, and in the end. It does not mean that all things that happen are good; and so, you should not say to somebody whose son has died suddenly in a car accident at the age of 23...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You shouldn't say: God sent this to you, so therefore, it is somehow a good thing, and you have got to figure out how it is good. That does not help a hurting person, and it certainly isn't true. So, not a hair can fall from our head, which is a metaphor for, you know, bad things happening. Jesus did not say no hair will fall from your head, he said, when it does, it is not because God has left you alone. There is some other reason for it. On other occasions, you know, when the disciples pointed to a man born blind or heard about a tower that collapsed and killed a bunch of people, they said: Were they sinners? Is that why they died? Were his parents sinners? Is that why...? No, Jesus said; it does not work that way. Just take assurance in the fact that *when* the bad thing happens, it was not because God went off duty or is punishing you.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is a book published recently by a theologian from Western Seminary named Todd Billings. He is actually a friend of *Groundwork*. He has appeared on *Groundwork* before; and he was diagnosed several years ago at the age of 39 with an incurable form of cancer; and so, he has wrestled very personally with these kinds of issues: What is God up to; and one of the things he says in this book called *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Struggling with life in Christ and incurable cancer 16:49). One of the things he says is that we need to leave the question of evil...of why bad things happen...we need to leave it open, and not try to solve it by saying: Well, that happened to you because you deserved it or you earned it; or by saying, on the other hand: Well, that happened to you because somehow God could not prevent it—he could not stop that—he could not help it—he is not strong enough—he is not

big enough. No, Todd says, leave it open. We read the words of the psalm and we know that they are not always literally true; the sun sometimes strikes us by day; sometimes the moon by night. We go out to a car crash and we come in to a cancer diagnosis; but yet, they are profoundly true in the ultimate sense, so we hold onto both things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so providence does put us in touch with some agonizing mysteries, but mostly it puts us in touch with wonderful benefits, and we are going to wonder about some of those benefits when we close the program in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*. So, Scott, let's think about some of the practical benefits that we can derive from the belief in providence—that God is watching over me—that God will care for me—that ultimately he will turn whatever happens to me to good; and here is one that strikes me right off the bat that is a wonderful truth, and that is that I really do matter to God; he really does care about me, and he cares for me. I mean, we are talking about *God* here, you know; the almighty ruler of the universe pays attention to me; even the hairs on my head are numbered.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the 20th Century, there was a flirtation with a new form of theology called process theology. It is probably still in existence; but process theology had a lot of things that I think were wrong that we do not need to get into; but one thing I really liked about process theology is that it pictured God as always with us; you know, going with us through every moment of our life; and the process theologians would talk about how God would tenderlyprehend into himself our every moment. By that, they mean he preserves our every moment. Nobody is ultimately going to be forgotten, which is a wonderful thing to know. You matter; you matter to God. God is not some far off engineer sitting at a console throwing levers and switches to run the world, and not knowing anybody. It is not deism, which is an early heresy of the Church—that God kind of created the world like a clock that he wound up and it has just been ticking down...

DAVE BAST

Or he is an absentee landlord and we are on our own in the apartment when things go wrong and need fixing. You know, society has become increasingly impersonal, hasn't it? We all have the frustration of dialing a number of a place we need to talk to and getting a recording. You know, you get the phone tree or whatever: If you want such-and-such, dial 1 or press 1; or you get a letter in the mail that says: Dear David Bast, you have been personally selected for... Or the latest one: I have been getting these calls that say: Don't hang up! And it is some recording...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

You know, with some...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a sure sign you should hang up immediately; but it is impersonal...

DAVE BAST

Impersonal, yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

You cannot talk to anybody.

DAVE BAST

You do not matter; you are a number; you are...an algorithm has spit you out from your online viewing preferences, or whatever it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But what this says is... So, the theme of this four-part series is belonging: I belong to Christ...we belong to Christ; and one of the implications of belonging to Christ because he bought us with his precious blood...because he set us free from fear and from the devil...one of the implications is that now he travels with us, he pays attention; we are not just a cipher—we are not just a number—we are people with names and with stories; and he knows our names and he knows our stories. So, we matter to God. That is a wonderful benefit of believing in providence.

DAVE BAST

Yes...that is a great one. Well, here is another one: The fact that God is watching over me does not automatically guarantee my earthly happiness...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

At least, as I define that...as I understand it...as I see it. This is where the real struggle comes in. Christians, for 2000 years now, have agonized with this and have wrestled with it; and sometimes personal tragedy kind of numbs people; it even maybe drives them away from faith. They kind of throw up their hands and conclude: Well, it is not true; it was all just a phony business. In a deeper way, I think, believers have all confessed in some way the mystery that, to put it in terms of an old TV show from when we were kids, Father knows best; you know, we kind of leave it with him; and although we don't understand, we still trust that God is with us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have been focusing on that question and answer of the Catechism: What is your only comfort in life and in death? What you just said, Dave, counts as, not a small comfort, that is a huge comfort; and we said in the first program, too, that when we talk about comfort in terms of the Bible—in terms of the New Testament—we don't mean fluffy pillows and cotton swabs, or you know, comfort food like a big, steaming pile of lovely mashed potatoes and beef roast; we mean comfort in the origin of the word *comfortis*—with strength. I think we have all been privileged...and it is a privilege as pastors, but also as family members...I think we have all been privileged now and then to watch a saint face his or her death with stalwart faith...no anxiety about what is next for them; and you look at that kind of strength in the face of what terrifies every person on the planet—death, and you say: It's true...it's true. This is our only comfort. God is with us.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, there is an old line that I have heard used, or I have read it: You can endure almost any *what* if you know the *why*—if there is some purpose to it. Yes, okay, I get that. There is some truth there; I don't want to dismiss that totally; but the fact is that often when we experience bad things or suffering, we are not going to know the why. God never did tell Job the why...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, he never did.

DAVE BAST

You know, that is one of the key things about Job; but I would like to change that phrase just a little bit and say: You can endure any *what* if you know the *who*—if you know the *who* who is with you—the who who somehow is behind it—the who who...the God who is there and your life has not spun out of his control and you haven't slipped through his fingers somehow, and you are not left alone. So, that is the Good News that

we celebrate because of the Gospel; thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, 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 as we explore the implications of God's grace and eternal care on our daily choices and on our behavior.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, and share what *Groundwork* means to you, as well as ideas for future *Groundwork* programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/i-belong-therefore-he-watches-over-me>

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