



## Season 12: Episode 4 | Bev Foster | How Can Scripture and Music Work Together to Bring Healing?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society, and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, CBS Ambassador Andrew Stirling will be interviewing Bev Foster. Bev Foster is an experienced musician and musical educator who has taught in both elementary and secondary schools, as well as her private studio. She is freelance as conductor, accompanist, clinician, and solo performer in community projects, as well as leading initiatives such as the Ontario Vocal Festival and David Festival.

Bev has degrees in music education from the University of Toronto and a piano performance degree from the Royal Conservatory of Music. She lives with her husband, Rob, in Port Perry, Ontario, and they have four adult children and five grandchildren. Currently, Bev is the founder and executive director of Room 217 Foundation, a Canadian health arts social enterprise.

She has successfully innovated the music care approach to effectively integrate music into the health care experience. Bev is a community research fellow of the Laurier Centre for Music in the Community. She speaks and writes on the power of music, especially in life-limiting situations.

Her passion for music is enhancing the quality of life and care, and it's contagious to those around her. Over the years, Bev has released many albums. And of that original

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music, in 2022, the Diverse Sounds Collection was named Innovation of the Year at the International Palliative Care Conference.

So, enjoy this conversation.

**Andrew Stirling:** Bev, I am so delighted that you're able to join us and take the time to be on Scripture Untangled.

I confess that I've looked forward to this interview for quite a long time, and I have spoken to many of your friends, and I'm even going to call them disciples, people who have been fed by your ministry and by your inspiration. And so, I thank you for taking the time and being with us.

Bev, to sort of begin and to give our audience a sense of who you are, can you tell us something about your background and how you came to faith and who perhaps were the influences in the development of that faith?

**Bev Foster:** Sure, thanks, Andrew.

It's really wonderful to be with you today, maybe a bit like you, I've been really looking forward to this too and to have this conversation with you.

Yeah, I mean, it's kind of like I had an amazing upbringing, really. I had parents who loved Jesus, and I would say their faith was quite integrated. My dad was a businessman, and so faith through business was part of my upbringing in that sense, watching God provide, watching God do these sorts of things. I'm one of six children, third from the top, and that alone in a family of origin story has some stories, for sure.

But we, you know, our family, we lived in my early years, we lived actually in the city, in Toronto. And as a student, I lived downtown. Now I live rurally in the greater Toronto area.

So, I've sort of always been in this Toronto area. I'm a wife to Rob over 40 years, and we have four adult children and five beautiful grandchildren. I've been a music

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educator professionally in my life, having my own studio, as well as in the elementary and secondary school panels. So, teaching music to children. I've been a worship leader. I think I started doing worship in church when I was nine, playing for services.

I'm still a worship leader at my church on the teams and that sort of thing. So that's a bit of my background. Interestingly, you know, my parents, when I was 11, really had this sense to move our family out of the suburbs, out of North York.

Their friends all thought they were crazy. They were going to wreck their kids moving into the country. And what I do remember was as an 11-year-old going into grade seven, just how fragile that decision would be for me.

And I think my parents knew it too. And I'm saying this because this is the kind of parents I've had and the upbringing. And they actually went away and prayed and fasted on that decision.

And their biggest concern was me, actually, of the six, because they knew sort of the vulnerabilities. I had an amazing piano teacher in Toronto, and I'd be leaving that opportunity. But when we moved and they ended up moving, it was amazing.

I had a new music teacher who was very well qualified, extremely well qualified, and then went to a school where there was an amazing music program, like one of the finest that now I know, in the country. And so, the opportunities for me were amazing. And I'm saying that because that was an influence in my life, right? Like big influence where you had parents who looked to God for those kinds of decisions that were impactful and that impacted my life.

Well, we ended up going to an amazing church when I was a teen, youth group, all that kind of stuff. And it was one of the youth groups that there were treats where I actually really said yes to Jesus for myself. It was my own personal decision to actually say yes to Him, follow Him, unequivocally, really, unequivocally.

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And it was one of those things where I knew I needed... The speaker was talking about Jesus on the cross and cleansing and that sort of thing. And I kind of knew I needed that, even at that age, like even at 12, I knew that. And so that's when I decided to really make Jesus and faith life my own.

In terms of other influences, of course, there were lots of people at my church that influenced me, mentors. I was at camp, so people at camp and that sort of thing. I was in denominational youth leadership in my later teens and early 20s.

That helped me just understand the bigger world of what was out there and that sort of thing in faith communities. And I went to Urbana. And that was a big influence as well.

Again, just extending that sense of a greater global community. So, I'm really grateful for solid beginnings.

**Andrew Stirling:** Has there, in terms of the role of Scripture, because this is Scripture Untangled, has there been a particular passage in the Bible or a particular story or character or moment in the Bible that's had an influence on you, you know, since those early beginnings in the faith?

**Bev Foster:** Well, I'll say at Urbana, it actually impacted me when Billy Graham talked about the fact that he read five psalms and a proverb every morning.

So, I actually, for a number of seasons of my life, have really tried to do that. I still read a psalm every morning. And one of those verses early on really has impacted me, and that's Psalm 90:12. "Just to number our days that will give to you a heart of wisdom." And that became like an anchor. It still is.

It's an anchoring text for me. It's been all about how I think about stewardship, my resources, my time, and what's really important, what the end game really is. So that's been an important piece for me.

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I mean, I'm not a Biblical scholar, Andrew, at all. I don't even sort of view the Bible academically. I would view it relationally, I think.

It's sort of the way God speaks to me and I interact with Him. Like, it nourishes me. I find words like, you know, God rescues my life on the terms of His promise.

Of course, I'm a Eugene Peterson fan for *The Message* version. But I find some of that language colorful and really feeds me. I find it grounding, too.

I'm thinking in many experiences in my life as a performer where anxiety can creep in. I'm thinking of a verse that's really grounded me. "I'll keep you in perfect peace when you pay attention and focus on Me." (*Isaiah 26:3*)

Those kinds of things really matter to me and I live by them. Passages like the love passage or fruit of the Spirit passage, how to do community together, those things have informed me and taught me. And of course, I think maybe still today, God's Word guides me and directs me.

I'm thinking, too, of a decision Rob and I made, maybe not as drastic as the one my parents made, but similar, where we were moving our kids in a certain sense. And we just really needed to know God's direction on it. And there was this verse, I know it's in *Isaiah*.

I think it's in the 52nd chapter. I can't really remember the verse number (*Isaiah 52:12*). But it was like, the Lord will go ahead of us and go ahead of you and be your rear guard.

And we actually held that. We held on to that because we could see the leading part. We couldn't really see the rear-guard part so much.

But in time, we did. So, I would say those are some of the ways God's Word is precious to me and works in my life today.

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**Andrew Stirling:** That's so encouraging because I think, you know, you said you didn't read it academically.

Well, sometimes reading it academically can be an impediment as well as a virtue. There's a way in which the Word of God speaks. And I mean, and that's actually what we say at the Bible Society.

We hear God speak. And clearly, this Word is spoken to you in times and seasons when you found it particularly moving. But by having the discipline of reading the Psalms on a daily basis, in a sense, you begin and you let the Word infuse you.

Bev, your education, though. I mean, so you are a scholar. You have a background in music.

You have a degree from the University of Toronto. And you've studied performance at the Royal Conservatory. What inspired you? And clearly, you were saying you were studying the piano at an early age.

And the parents saw in you a talent in music that naturally has flourished. What inspired you to immerse yourself in music in the first place?

**Bev Foster:** Yeah, it's interesting. Mom says I started picking out tunes when I was two.

I actually don't remember that. I remember lessons starting at seven. But, you know, my dad played by ear.

We had an organ and a piano in our home. And when I was younger, my brothers and I played instruments and stuff like that. But from my own personal inspiration, I think I just love music.

Like, I just love it. I hear it. I read it. I feel it. It makes sense to me.

And that's probably... The other thing about music for me is that it's like a container. Because I think when I'm feeling certain things, I can... if I have to go play

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*Rachmaninoff*, I can get it out. Or if I have to play, you know, *The Goodness of God*, like a worship song like that, I can get it out. Or if I just need to express and make it up myself.

I'm just thinking, you know, like, there was this one time when one of our teenage children was going through something. And as a mom, like, my heart was just breaking. And I remember one night just going into the living room in the piano, turning off all the lights, and just playing.

Not singing, just playing. And a song came out. And I now call it *Everlasting Love*.

It happens to be on my *Deeply Loved* album. But like, that is a certain container for me of feelings and grief and expression. And joy, too.

It doesn't just have to be grief. But I think, yeah, I just... Music's been my friend. And I love... Music is beautiful to me.

When I was 17, I heard the *Brahms Requiem* for the first time. And *Psalm 84* has never been the same since I heard that. "How lovely is your dwelling place?" I want it at my funeral.

You know, it's one of those beautiful, transcendent pieces of music that just touches my soul. But, you know, so can *Jupiter* from *The Planets*. But so can *Gabriel's Oboe* from *The Mission*, right?

And so, it's... I'm not really stuck necessarily in a style, but there's just...

**Andrew Stirling:** So, there's not a particular genre that you always go to as your default genre? You have a breadth to what you do?

**Bev Foster:** You know, my dad was the editor of a hymnal.

So, I grew up on hymns, you know, in terms of some of his lay work. But I started in the conservatory. So, I love classics.

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But, you know, in school, in high school and stuff, I did a lot of pop music and jazz. And then, you know, the worship music, I've just followed the trends through the last number of decades. So, yeah, I kind of... I like beautiful music.

I like beautiful music. And I love music from other cultures, too. It's not just my own.

But, you know, the other thing I love about music probably drew me... I don't think of the most, but it's definitely another factor is music is so dynamic. And it isn't just sort of music. Like it's music and there's a lot to it, right? Like you can interact with music and engage with it as a listener, as a performer, as an analyst.

You can analyze it, as a composer. You know, there's just lots of ways to do it. I can do it on my own. I can do it with other people.

**Andrew Stirling:** I found, you know, Bev, though, as a teenager, I was a guitarist and I performed. And in a sense, the music sort of saw me through my teens.

It allowed me to emote in ways that I couldn't emote otherwise. And music became my voice. And in a sense, almost hearing it back was an inspiration to me and a guide to me.

And so, my faith and my music sort of went hand in hand. And that's what I see in you. But what I also see in you is somebody who wants to share that and to create it in others.

You're the founder and you're the executive director of Room 217 Foundation that deals with health and music. And this is dear to my heart. So, what experience inspired you to begin that enterprise? And I think for our audience, I think I know the answer.

But what does the name Room 217 mean? And what significance does it have in your own life?

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**Bev Foster:** Even when I was a teenager, I would make, at that time, cassette tapes of music for people that were sick and sometimes dying and just do that. But during my dad's illness, music was a huge part of our relationship. And over the years, he would play the organ, I'd play the piano.

And even when I was a student at U of T, I would be bringing a trumpet home for one semester or a clarinet for another semester. And we'd play hymns together just so I could practice my fingering and stuff as I was learning the new instruments. So, dad and I had a pretty close bond around music.

And when he was diagnosed with a terminal illness, which was fairly quick in its trajectory, music was the way he and I connected. And so that became quite a powerful thing. But there was a moment, a very poignant moment, and a catalytic moment for me when dad was dying, literally actively dying, in Room 217, so maybe you did guess it, at a local small hospital here in Uxbridge.

And my family, all six of us, now adults with our own kids, and my mom were surrounding him, his bedside, and we were singing the hymns he loved. And it was pretty... I mean, I'd seen some stuff and felt some stuff around illness and that sort of thing. But that was a moment I won't forget.

He was subcutaneously morphine, and he was trying to sing with us. And we actually couldn't even remember all the words of the hymns he loved. And of course, we were singing the songs he loved, because this was about him.

So, we would kind of didn't even matter, we would just go la la la, you know, if we didn't know. But I think what struck me, especially as a musician, was hearing him try to sing with us.

And it was so powerful. It was really; it was a sound I'd never really heard before. And I think what it did for my family, I guess I'm sort of speaking for us, but I think I can, after this number of years, it was like a really connecting moment for us.

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And a very comforting moment, I think, for all of us, and especially for dad. He passed, you know, he passed just some hours later after those moments we had together as a family and just deep communication, right, around the music. And so that was kind of the grounding story.

I remember being in the parking lot that night. Dad had been in a large Toronto hospital for 100 nights during those 18 months and never been offered music. And even at the smaller hospital, never offered music.

And look, I'm not, this isn't a diss. Honestly, it's not. It's just an observation that I'm going, I wonder why? Did caregivers, do they not know the power of music in living and dying? And, or like, I don't know.

And do they not have the tools and the resources to use it? Because I mean, music is something we can all, whether you're a professional musician or perceive yourself to be a musician or not, music is something we all use. And so those two questions, Andrew, have been motivators and continue to be the drivers of what now is called the Room 217 Foundation. We started a not-for-profit and Canadian registered charity that launched in 2008, in that area.

And we've been working at it ever since. I guess I never went back to the classroom after my kids, but I have a new classroom teaching caregivers. We've now taught more than 5,000 caregivers across the country in our training.

And what we're really hoping through the tools we create, the training and the certification, is that care providers and family caregivers and musicians can have the tools and the skills they need to be able to integrate music into their daily practice. Doesn't make them a music therapist, which is a particular clinical practice, but it gives them some confidence to do what a lot of them are doing anyway.

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**The Bible Course:** Taking a minute here out of the conversation with Bev, to tell you about The Bible Course, because whether you're a seasoned Bible reader or you're just starting on the journey, The Bible Course offers a superb overview of the world's best-selling book.

This eight-session course will help you grow in your understanding of the Bible. Using a unique storyline, The Bible Course shows how key events, books and characters all fit together. It's great for in-person groups or digital gatherings.

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That's Bible Course . ca . And the link is down in the show notes.

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**Andrew Stirling:** It's a wonderful organization. And then one of the people who took the music care program, writes about how she dealt with her father's suffering from Parkinson's in the long-term care setting.

And music helps during the palliative care stage. And as you're talking about, really with your father, with a singular song. What is it, do you think, about music though that actually aids in healing? Is there something unique to music that is a gift from God in a moment like that?

**Bev Foster:** It's a big question. It's a really big question.

At one level, it's a simple answer. I mean, God has created music. It's all over His creation with vibrations and rhythms and even prosody, like the ups and the downs.

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So yes, it's a gift of God. He's created it. I believe He's hardwired it actually in creating our brain.

And there's just now so much scientific evidence around why music works, why there's this therapeutic capacity. I believe that it comes directly from the Creator, you know, God Himself. But yeah, palliative care is an interesting kind of application because, you know, music, I will say from a research perspective or an evidence-based perspective, music can reach into every human domain.

And this is why I say, I think we've been created this way. So, in palliative care, you know, a lot of the time it's really, you're looking at existential kinds of meaningful things. And so, music can accompany some of those questions that come.

And there's another thing that happens in palliative care called relationship completion. It's actually a term where people complete relationships by, you know, expressing these sentiments: I love you. Thank you. Goodbye.

You know, and sometimes there's forgiveness issues and that sort of thing. And sometimes when people don't have the words at the end, for whatever reason, like my dad being subcutaneously morphined, or maybe they've lost their words from a stroke or from other disease pathway, music can be those words for them. And they can actually, it can actually express. So, I think that's something that can really happen.

Music can bring a lot of comfort and peace to people at the end of life. But the thing about music and this whole idea of music as healing, now, music can be used in rehab. Because we know that rhythm is like a primer in the brain.

And for example, in acquired brain injury or in Parkinson's, where mobility may be an issue or gait may be an issue, music and the nature of rhythm being regular, for example, can help people walk and learn to walk again. And around prosody and just finding the flow of words, therapies like melodic intonation therapy can be used to help people actually learn to speak again. And it's very exciting.

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I find mental health; there's all kinds of ways music can be used for resiliency and coping. And in dementia, which is something we do work a lot in that space, when words go, music can often, it is the modality often that, I love this, Dr. Oliver Sacks said, "music can find the preserved self." And it often is because of the association of music and our memories, and how music's encoded with our memories, that people can find themselves again.

But that's God creating our brains and our mechanisms that way for music and the vibrations and all of that. This isn't by happenstance.

**Andrew Stirling:** I mean, you're explaining in much greater detail something that I experienced, Bev, when I was a chaplain at a psychiatric hospital, when I was a student minister and I spent six months at the Nova Scotia Hospital.

And I was there to provide chaplain care. And there was one particular patient who was extremely agitated at times. And one woman said to me, she quoted Jim Croce's song, "I had to say I love you in a song, in a song."

You know, can this person have any music in their lives? Well, lo and behold, they were introduced, of all things, to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. And, you know, in those days, you had the Sony Walkman and so on. You'd put a Sony Walkman on, and you would play Bach and his horrors of anxiety would just diminish right before your eyes.

It was an incredible thing to see. And so, you know, I haven't really ever articulated it beyond that experience. But early on in my ministry, I saw the power of it and the influence of it and what difference it makes.

**Bev Foster:** You know, interesting you say that because that's music care. And that's the approach we've sort of researched and developed. And that's what Room 217 is doing.

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We call it the music care approach, where people like yourself, a chaplain, can use music and you see the effects of it, right? Interestingly, though, what we found, and science has found this too, that what might work for you might not work for somebody else.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yes.

**Bev Foster:** Right. So, it's, I think, you know, again, rooting it back to my story with my dad, what was really important around his bedside is we used his music, the music that meant a lot to him.

And that, you know, we know that that usually has the most effect on people is music. It's not always that, but mostly. So that's an exciting story.

I didn't know, you were doing music care.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah, I guess I never even consciously thought of that. I just followed on a lead from somebody and off it went.

And I would sometimes even bring my guitar on to the ward. One day, it was just a time when we had nothing really on the agenda. And one of the nurses actually said to me, Andrew, why don't you just bring your guitar and just play and sing? And then sometimes I did my own songs.

Sometimes I did songs that were popular. And, you know, I used to sort of do folk music and so on very much in the '70s sort of milieu. And they'd sing along and they'd come out to it.

And often we did it when they lined up to get their medications early in the morning. And then I would have the guitar and then we would sing and we would play. And then they'd go to the respective therapies.

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It was a fascinating time. I kind of broke some rules in doing it. I'll be honest, it was never really part of the job description for a student, a divinity student to do something like that.

But it just naturally it just naturally happened.

**Bev Foster:** The effects, right? It happens. It's many times it's immediate.

And I, you know, for years, we would do Christmas morning where my grandmother at the long-term care home. She was and we'd start and we'd walk. And it'd be like the Pied Piper of Hamlin.

People would be behind us because it attracts people, right? They come and it's very human. Music's very human. And I mean, I think sometimes when you're in these care spaces, it can feel almost not human.

**Andrew Stirling:** Oh, yeah. Oh, very much so.

**Bev Foster:** Somebody brings a guitar in and sings. There's music. I'm alive again. I'm in life again.

And so, you know, this is very important work.

**Andrew Stirling:** Yeah. And that's why I've really wanted to talk to you.

You can see now, Bev, why I've really wanted to talk to you. Clearly, prayer has played a part in your devotional life. Not only the reading of Psalms, but and you have also been known for hosting retreats at your own home.

And you and your husband have been very gracious about that. What's the core of those gatherings and the concept of retreat and gathering together? What's at the core of that, Bev?

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**Bev Foster:** Yeah, I think, you know, for people to come apart from the day-to-day life is really, really important to have some space. And we happen to buy the farm where my parents moved, actually.

So, we have some acreage and some vista and some things to share with people. So, one of the reasons we bought it because we really wanted to share. And I think, you know, coming away, retreating and perhaps Rob and I can offer maybe something a little bit different.

We love to worship. And, you know, worship is essential in that. And, you know, Rob's a teacher and he does a lot of the sort of, I would say, if it's a teaching retreat, we'd be doing some of that.

So, we just love doing that. And I think worship and prayer, to me, they're almost inseparable. They go together.

There is a song I wrote on the album I just released, *Grace Received*, called *Gethsemane Surrender*. It's such a worship song for me, but it's a prayer song, right? Because really, surrender and praying and letting things go and releasing them. That is what worship is.

So, the worship and prayer is connected. And to be able to do it and share the space, you know, God's given us here with others. It brings us great joy.

**Andrew Stirling:** Well, I've heard anecdotally from people who have gone to your retreats who have told me how incredibly beautiful and inspiring it is. So, there is evidence to support your claims. There's evidence to support that on the other side, people have really appreciated what you've done.

Bev, I ask this of every person as our time sort of winds down. And I asked it of my very first guest, who at the time was actually dying. And it was a very emotional conversation, my very first one.

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And I asked, what can we do to pray for you? What would you and our audience and our people pray for Bev Foster and your ministry? Bev, what do you want us to pray for you?

**Bev Foster:** Thank you. I really appreciate you asking that. I don't take that question lightly.

And very appreciatively in terms of this response. But clearly, you know, my own personal music that God has given me, just some of the songs He's given me, especially in the last five or six years, those songs would find their way into people that need to hear them. They're songs about hope.

They're songs about the grace Jesus has to restore broken places and to bring all this healing. And so, yeah, just on that score for my own personal music, to find those people that need to hear it.

From a Room 217 perspective, pray for culture change. I really see the work we're doing in music and care as to leverage culture change in the care culture. To bring a more human, personal, person-centered kind of approach into the care that's provided for people in all kinds of care spaces. We work in all kinds of care spaces.

So, yeah, just pray that leaders, decision makers will be open to that. And we can pray for Rob and I in the retreats and just our family and that sort of thing. But probably that's what a lot of people ask for is prayer for their families and stuff like that. But that's where I would be going with that question, Andrew.

**Andrew Stirling:** Well, Bev, rest assured that there will be people who will respond to your request. And we'll be praying for you.

And in a sense, when you talk about culture change, what you're doing actually does facilitate a change in culture in many ways. It is a witness to the culture that we're in. And it validates the dignity of human life and the power of faith and the gift of music.

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I think the angels in heaven will be blowing their trumpets and applauding with sound as they hear you. And I know all of us at the Bible Society have gratitude for what you're doing. So, thank you for your time, Bev.

God bless you. And God bless Room 270.