

Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26

Romans 8:28-39

May 8, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

ALL SHALL BE WELL

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A couple of months ago, in my sermon on the third Sunday of Lent, I mentioned Rev. Dwight L. Moody, famous American evangelist, and the overwhelming losses his ministry sustained in The Great Chicago Fire of October 8-10, 1871. You might remember that one of Rev. Moody's most famous quotations is, "God never made a promise that was too good to be true."

Another person who suffered grievous losses during the fire was Horatio G. Spafford. He was a very successful lawyer and businessman and a devout Christian, Presbyterian layman. He counted Rev. Moody among his friends. Mr. Spafford had invested heavily in real estate along the shoreline of Lake Michigan and lost all of it in the fire. Shortly before the fire and his financial losses, his son died.

In 1873, Rev. Moody planned an evangelistic tour in Great Britain. Mr. Spafford arranged a European retreat for his family, a part of which was meant to assist Rev. Moody. After Mr. Spafford had booked passage on a ship, he had to make a last minute change due to some business obligations. He sent his wife and four daughters on ahead and promised to follow a few days later.

Tragically, on November 22, 1873, the ship was struck by an English vessel. Within twelve minutes, the ship had sunk. When the survivors finally arrived in Cardiff, Wales, Mrs. Spafford cabled a two word message to her husband, "Saved alone." Their four daughters had drowned. Mr. Spafford immediately sailed for Wales to meet his wife. He had to sail along the same route as the ill-fated ship. According to the family's tradition, when Mr. Spafford's ship approached the site of the accident, the captain, who knew of the tragedy, alerted Mr. Spafford. It is said he wrote a familiar hymn as he passed by the spot where he had suffered such a horrendous loss.

Philip P. Bliss wrote the tune for Mr. Spafford's hymn and named it after the ship that had sunk — "Ville du Havre." Here are the first two stanzas of the hymn:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll,
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
it is well, it is well with my soul.
It is well with my soul;
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
let this blest assurance control,
that Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
and hath shed his own blood for my soul.
It is well with my soul;
it is well, it is well with my soul.¹*

Do those sound like the words of a man who believes that, just because you put your trust in Jesus Christ as Lord, you will never have another problem in life? Not at all. One description of Mr. Spafford's life story described it as "a saga reminiscent of Job." His son died, he lost everything he owned in The Great Fire, and his four daughters were lost at sea. Several years later, another son, Horatio who was born in 1880, died of scarlet fever. No, Mr. Spafford knew full well and in a very painful, personal way what the Apostle Paul described as "hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword." (Romans 8:35)

In last week's sermon, I mentioned the comment of Bible teacher and preacher Harry Ironside, "When you are studying your Bible and encounter the word 'therefore,' always stop and see what it's THERE FOR! A reason certainly exists." Well, again this week we encounter another "therefore" in Paul's letter to the Romans. We shouldn't be surprised, since that is the pattern of Paul's letters. He typically writes about God's love, Christ's death and resurrection, grace and mercy, justification and sanctification, the resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit, and then says, "**Therefore**, because of this, so then . . ." and proceeds to describe the Christian life in Christ.

Paul writes, "What **then** are we to say about these things?" In light of God's grace, mercy, forgiveness of sin, the new life in Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, Paul asks some important questions about how you and I are going to live and face the present and the future:

- * If God is for us, who is against us? No one!
- * Who will bring any charges against God's elect? Is it God? No!
- * Who will condemn us? Is it Christ Jesus? No!
- * Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Is it hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No!

Now, don't misunderstand what Paul is saying! Certainly there will be people and powers against us. Certainly charges of this or that will be lodged against us, especially when we live and act consistently with our faith. Certainly people will condemn us when we follow God's leading and go another way. Certainly the daily headlines and the harsh realities of our personal lives will threaten to overwhelm us — we might even feel separated from God. Or, as Horatio Spafford wrote, "*when sorrows like sea billows roll, though Satan should buffet, though trials should come.*"

Paul's list of challenges almost reads like a biography of his life as an apostle for Jesus Christ. And, yet, Paul would keep on keepin' on in his work and witness for Jesus Christ. That's why, in spite of the realities of hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword, and everything imaginable that those things represent,

Paul can emphatically say, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Notice that Paul **does not** say, “We are more than conquerors because we are so talented, so faithful, so crafty, so powerful, so good, so creative, so smart.” No, Paul writes, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Therefore! “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39)

Isn't that the same assurance that lifted Horatio Spafford and saw him through the great trials of his life? The final two verses of his hymn talk about what our faithful God has done and will do:

*He lives: O the bliss of this glorious thought.
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
It is well with my soul;
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

*Lord, hasten the day when our faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
the trumpet shall sound and the Lord shall descend;
even so it is well with my soul.
It is well with my soul;
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

When I baptize an infant or young child, I call the child by name and say, “For you Jesus came into the world; for you he died and conquered death; all this he did for you, little one, though you know nothing of it as yet. We love because God first loved us.” Then I put the water in my hand, call the child by name again, and say, “Child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” All of us watching the baptism are encouraged to remember our own baptisms and to recommit our lives to follow Jesus Christ and live in his power and promise. Then, a final time, I call the child by name, and pronounce this blessing and commissioning over the child, “Child of the covenant, in baptism, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked as God's own forever, and called to follow Christ in mission.”

Daniel Clendenin, who founded the “Journey with Jesus” webzine and whose writings I enjoy reading, shared the following story from a few years ago (thus, the reference to “this past Easter” — not three weeks ago on April 17). He remembered, “This past Easter, we had a baptism in our church. After the little boy rose from his third plunge beneath the waters, our priest made the sign of the cross on his forehead. As he did so, he recited those beautiful and powerful words: ‘William, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ. You belong to God.’ The next

day, William told his mother, ‘I can still feel the cross. I hope it never comes off.’ Rev. Clendenin writes, “The oily cross wore off his forehead, but not God’s unconditional promise. William belongs to God, forever, full stop. Nothing can ever change that. Trusting that we belong to God, that nothing can separate us from his providential care, and conforming ourselves to his will rather than to the ways of the world, ‘the greatest honor we can give almighty God,’ says Juliana of Norwich, ‘is to live gladly because of the knowledge of love.’”²

In 1372, when she was thirty years old, Juliana of Norwich in England, became seriously ill. She was expected to die. However, a week later, the crisis passed and she experienced a series of fifteen visions of Christ in his Passion. Interestingly, these visions brought her peace and joy. She moved into a small hut on the grounds of the town church. She spent the rest of her life praying and reflecting on the meaning of her visions. She also counseled people with a combination of spiritual insight and common sense. Perhaps her best known thought, from all of her profound writings and contemplations on God and Jesus Christ, is this: “All shall be well, all shall be well, in all manner of thing all shall be well.” The website of the St. Julian of Norwich Episcopal Church in Round Rock, Texas says this hope and assurance “is rooted in her belief that God is love and present with us.”³

I read the newspaper. I listen to the news. I get news updates online — just as all of you do. I don’t think I’m naive about the sufferings of this life and this world, although in many ways I have been blessed and spared many of the unimaginable sufferings and sorrows we read and hear about. And as I look out at you in the congregation, I am aware of the struggles you face and I think about all of the things we have been through together — times of joy and times of sorrow, times of success and times of failure, times when we were sure of God’s presence among us and times when we wondered where God was.

I hope we can always say, with Horatio Spafford and St. Juliana of Norwich, “It is well with my soul . . . all shall be well” — not because of anything we have done on our own, not because we are naive, not because we turn a blind eye and deaf ear to the sorrows and sufferings and challenges of life.

No, I hope can always say, with Horatio Spafford and St. Juliana of Norwich, “If God is for us, who is against us? In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

That’s why “all shall be well, all shall be well, and in all manner of thing all shall be well.”

Let us pray: Blessed are you, O Lord our God, for the love which you have shown us through Jesus Christ our Lord. In him who loved us, we are more than conquerors over hardship, distress, persecution, famine, na-

kedness, peril and the sword. Because of Jesus Christ, we trust that nothing will be able to separate us from your great love. Send us into the world to carry out your will. May we witness to Jesus Christ, our only Savior, and may we grow in grace and in your peace which passes all understanding, that your name may be glorified. Amen.

NOTES

¹This information was taken from two sources:

“History of Hymns: ‘It Is Well with My Soul,’ Horatio G. Spafford, The UM Hymnal, No. 377 at www.umcdiscipleship.org and

Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), No. 840, “When Peace Like a River (It Is Well with My Soul),” pp. 802-803.

²Daniel B. Clendenin, “You Belong to God,” at www.journeywithjesus.net.

³“Who is St. Julian?” St. Julian of Norwich Episcopal Church, Round Rock, Texas at www.stjuliansaustin.org.