

It Is Well with My Soul

From LWML Sunday Materials by Dr. Dale Meyer
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Psalm 31:1-5 1 In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. 2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me! 3 For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me; 4 you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge. 5 Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. (ESV)

Back in the 1800's a man named Horatio Spafford wrote a hymn, and in the process created a line familiar to many Christians: *It is well, it is well with my soul*. Perhaps you are familiar with Mr. Spafford's hymn but the refrain may not accurately describe your attitude: "It is well, it is well with my soul." Is it really? It's not always well with my soul and I know it's not always well with your soul. Many times a soul that is well is more of pious hope than reality. You want your soul to feel well, yet so often it is in anguish! In your private times of prayer and when you come here for public worship, you don't always feel that it is well with your soul.

You are in good company. That is how it was for King David. In Psalm 31, just a few verses after today's text, David wrote. "*Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also*" (v. 9). Things weren't so well with David's soul. Whatever the details might have been, David's enemies were strong against him. "*They scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life*" (v. 13). And it got worse. Usually, even if your enemies are coming against you, you can count on your friends. But that was not true here for David: "*Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me*" (v.11). These were some of David's problems. It was not well with David's soul.

You probably don't have enemies plotting to take your life in the same way David was targeted but you are threatened in ways that previous generations were not. Terrorists certainly wouldn't hesitate to kill any of us, or all of us. But closer to our personal daily lives, we can identify with people being against us. David said, "*Let lying lips be mute*" (v. 18) and you've heard lying lips say things against you that are not true. Many times gossipers don't have a clue what they're talking about. They slander you, harm your reputation, put the worst construction on what you've done, or what they imagine you've done. They break the Eighth Commandment and there's not a whole lot you can do about it. Of course there are times when you or I have given them reason to complain. We confessed our sins earlier and the truth is that our sins, even though

forgiven because of Jesus Christ, those forgiven sins still tempt people to talk. And sometimes our struggle is against spiritual forces. I think you can tell when our shared ministry is going the way it should – Satan steps up his attacks on those who are involved in that ministry. He will tell you that you are overwhelmed, ineffective, not doing any good in an effort to get you to throw in the towel. Whether the attack is from demons or people, your hearts become heavy and you have good reason to say, “It is NOT well with my soul!”

All that said, with all the injustices of life, look at the wonderful thing that goes with it. “***In You, O Lord, do I take refuge,***” David says. That’s his lead line in Psalm 31. “In You, O Lord, do I take refuge.” If things weren’t well with his soul, David knew right where to go to make it well and he went to God immediately. “In You, O Lord, do I take refuge” and he follows that appeal with many more expressions of his confidence in God. “***You are my rock and my fortress; and for your name’s sake you lead me and guide me***” (v. 3). David expressed his confidence in God because God had helped David before and David knew that God keeps His promises. As another example, David says, “***Into Your hand I commit my spirit,***” and then says what God has done. “***You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God***” (v. 5). Later David confessed his faith that the faithful God is there for him. “***You have seen my affliction; You have known the distress of my soul***” (v. 7). And one more, although there are many more throughout this magnificent psalm, “***I trust in You, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in Your hand***” (vv. 14-15). David knew right where to go when things were not well with his soul.

Now that was David. Wouldn’t it be great to have that instinctive response? When life is ganging up on you, when not only your enemies but sometimes your friends aren’t there for you, what a great thing to turn immediately to God for help! You’ve got it too! It’s in you to do the same. Actually, it’s been put in you. This instinct to turn to God isn’t naturally yours but it was born into you by your **Baptism**. When you were baptized you were redeemed from the greatest of troubles, from the guilt of sin, from the dread of death, and from domination by evil. In Baptism God brought you into His fortress, into His safe place of forgiveness even if people won’t let go of your sins and shortcomings. In Baptism God brought you into His fortress where hope abounds, especially when you’re tempted to despair about your situation in life. In Baptism God brought you into His fortress where His love for you reaches down into your soul, a welcome thing in our so often loveless world. What prompted David to turn to God has been put in you by

your Baptism into Jesus Christ. Your life is now hidden with God in Christ (Colossians 3:3). And so you turn to God as David did and you confess as David confessed, ***“You are my rock and my fortress.... You are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God”*** (vv.3-5). When the faithful God has led you again to such a confession, you say, ***“It is well with my soul. It is well.”*** The Spirit that prompted David to go straight to God is the same Spirit that is among us in our times of trouble. “It is well with my soul. It is well.”

I mentioned Horatio Spafford at the beginning of this sermon. In the 1800’s Horatio Spafford was a successful Chicago lawyer, a rich man with many real estate holdings. Wealth is fleeting and the great Chicago fire of 1871 wiped out much of Spafford’s wealth. Not a good time for the Spafford family. Just think of the times when you weren’t sure about your economic future. Anyway, Spafford and his wife needed to get away and still had sufficient resources for a good vacation. So they planned a trip to Europe. When the time came to set out on their vacation, some last minute business detained Mr. Spafford but he sent his wife and four daughters ahead of him on the S.S. Ville Du Havre. On November 22 disaster struck. Their ship, the Ville Du Havre, was struck by an English ship and sank almost immediately. The four daughters were lost; only Mrs. Spafford survived from their family. When Horatio Spafford sailed across the Atlantic to join his grieving wife, the captain called him to the bridge and reported that they were at the place where the Ville Du Havre had gone down. Can you imagine the feelings? I can’t, but the story goes that shortly thereafter Spafford wrote his famous words.

***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.***

Dare I say that the difficult times can prove to be times of special blessing? I’m not suggesting that we should enjoy the difficult times. I don’t think David got a kick out of his troubles. That said, it’s the tough times, the times when the weight of the world is on your heart, the times when you’re suffering unjustly, you’ve done nothing wrong but people are talking against you, these times when you realize that the universe doesn’t revolve around you and doesn’t seem to care about you... In such times you’re experiencing first-hand your sinful mortality. When you’re getting “crucified,” you get a better appreciation for the One who really was crucified. Jesus Christ knew what David went through. Jesus Christ knows what you go through. Jesus Christ went through that and much more. He took our sins and the sins of those who sin against you, he

took all sins upon Himself and paid for them to God. Our Christian faith is not about glory, at least not yet, for there is heavenly glory to come. Yes, Jesus Christ rose from the dead and ascended to glory. Someday in glory “God will wipe away every tear our eyes (Isaiah 25:8; Revelation 7:17). But here and now it’s not about glory, not about sweetness day-in and day-out. We have hard times. And though they many not be welcome, these times get us into the heart of Christian faith. They bring us again into the fortress of God’s protection.

“**Rock! Rest on Christ the King!**” That’s the theme this year for our Lutheran Women in Mission, the LWML. We go to God because God is faithful and cares for us. As David used the thirty-first Psalm to tell people that God is rock and fortress, so the LWML is telling people the same today. The women of the LWML do that through their meetings and conversations. I want to highlight the literature they make available to all of us. Their “**Lutheran Woman’s Quarterly**” has interesting articles and inspiring devotions. The LWML offers **devotional books**: “You Make a Difference,” “You Are Precious,” “You Are Special,” “You Are Loved,” and “One Cup of Water.” The LWML has other **devotional resources** especially suited to busy people on the go: “Mug Meditations,” “Noontime Nibbles,” and “Mustard Seeds,” just to name a few. These are resources through which God can make it well with your soul. Thank you, Lutheran Women in Mission, for all you do for us!

In an issue of the “Lutheran Woman’s Quarterly,” **Dr. LuJuana R. Butts** tells how she learned to pray. Says Dr. Butts, “I remember learning how to pray on my knees beside my mother, saying the twenty-third Psalm, knowing that He was my Shepherd. No matter how much hunger was there, the growling, the stomach pains, or whatever, we were not going to be in want because He was there to take care of us.” (Winter, 2006; p. 2) Dr. Butts learned as a child, the troubles of life notwithstanding, it was well with her soul. Now she shares that as a professor at our Concordia College in Bronxville, New York. **Horatio Spafford** knew that in the depths of grief, it was well with his soul and he has shared that with everyone who sings his hymn. And **David** knew it in the midst of his troubles. His words in Psalm 31 are God’s inspired words to us today. Since God has brought you and me in the fortress of His care, a safe place where we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1), we can say an assured fact, “***It is well with my soul. It is well.***” Amen.