

Festival of the Reformation

November 1, 2020

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Life can be so unpredictable—joys and sorrows, blessings and difficulties can come so unexpectedly. Our life's dreams and plans can change in an instant. We all know this to be true. So how can we find peace amid such turbulence? Horatio Spafford knew something about life's unexpected challenges. He was a successful attorney and real estate investor who lost a fortune in the great Chicago fire of 1871. Around the same time, his four-year-old son died of scarlet fever.

Horatio thought that it might be good for him and his family to go on a vacation to Europe. At the last moment, he had some pressing business to finish. He sent his family ahead of him and hoped to join them in a few days later after they would arrive. However, while crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the ship would be involved in a terrible collision and sunk. More than 200 people lost their lives, including all four of Horatio's daughters. His wife would survive and would be rescued. When she arrived in England, she sent a telegram to her husband back in Chicago, "*Saved alone. What shall I do?*"

Horatio immediately left for England. At one point during his voyage, the captain of the ship that he was on, became aware of the tragedy that had struck the Spafford family. He would summon Horatio to tell him that they were now passing over the spot where the shipwreck had occurred. As he thought about his daughters and wife struggling in the ocean water, words of comfort and hope filled his heart and his mind. He would write them down, and they later would become a well-known 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.*

Even in the worst of tragedies, Horatio knew that with faith in a loving God and with trust in His divine help, he could confidently say, "*It is well, it is well with my soul.*" Perhaps that is the feeling that the words of our text can capture as well. When Jeremiah looked at the children of Israel, he saw a broken people. 800 years before Jeremiah spoke these words of our text, God had made a promise to his people. God had brought the children of Israel out of Egypt in a miraculous way. He had delivered them from the hands of Pharaoh. He brought them to Mount Sinai and God made a simple agreement with them. If you obey me, I will bless you like crazy. **"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."** (Ex. 19:5-6)

God was going to give them more than they could even imagine. Like any good contract or agreement, there were two sides to this agreement. God had told them what he was going to do. But he also told them what he expected from them. **You shall have no other gods. You shall not misuse my name. You will remember the Sabbath day, etc. How did they respond? "We will do everything the Lord has said."** (Ex. 19:8) How long did that agreement last? While Moses is up on the mountain, they are building a golden calf below. Over and over again they broke God's agreement.

Jeremiah is the prophet who is often called the "weeping prophet." He was God's prophet in Jerusalem when the hammer of God's justice finally came down on His rebellious people of Israel. For centuries the LORD God kept calling His people to repentance. But they just didn't get it until they got it from God in famine, disease and disaster. Most of Jeremiah's 52 chapters pronounce doom and gloom that finally came in 586 B.C. at the iron end of Babylonian spears and arrows. The temple was burned and God's capital city of Jerusalem destroyed.

Yet, right in the middle of this book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah speaks words of comfort. **"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."** If the Israelites were going to be saved, if they would be restored, it would not happen because of any merit in them. Their rescue would no way rest upon themselves. So, God would make a new covenant.

You see, the people of Jeremiah's day had a sin problem. They couldn't fix the problem of sin. The people of Martin Luther's day had a sin problem. Martin Luther tried. The harder he tried, the more desperate and depressed he became.. We have sin problem. You can try as hard as you want, and you will never solve the problem. As you try, it is all the more frustrating and depressing. It is a problem that we can never solve. It needed to be solved by God. That's what the Lutheran Reformation is about. It's about God restoring the message of hope and forgiveness back to the Christian Church. It is the message that *it is well with my soul*.

So, the first covenant that God made wasn't working. So, he changed it. **"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time... I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."** You know how crazy these words sound? They are not words that you would expect from a perfect God. He no longer says: *"If you do this, I will do this."* God says that it is no longer about me or you, He says it is about me. I will do this. No more "ifs." These are maybe the best words that you can find in all the pages of the Bible: **"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."**

Those words are hard for me to wrap my head around. How can God just **forget**? How good is your memory? What are the things that we tend to remember? We tend to remember the bad things, don't we? If you go to a restaurant ten times, and you had only one bad experience, which one do you remember? If someone says words to hurt you, which words do we remember? We often remember the things that we should forget, but don't remember the things that we should.

God doesn't just forgive. He chooses not to remember. He erases the board. There are no strings attached this time. No conditions. He keeps no record of wrongs. He says: **"I will remember their sins no more."** Done. Period. And when God makes a promise, he always makes good on it.

Why would God do this? That's what God's Grace is. God chooses to remember Jesus' perfection instead. He sees the blood of his Son shed for your sins and my sins. How can we know how things stand between us and God? Look at the cross. Look at Jesus. There we see God's promise fulfilled. There we see that it is *well with my soul*. Amen.