

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?¹

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“Why do good things happen to good people?” Now, by asking that question, we have already set the teeth on edge of any good theologian among us because it is a poorly framed question. First of all, none of us are really good people, are we? We’re not righteous, for “there is none righteous, no not one” (Rom. 3:10; c.f. Ps. 14:1, 3; 53:1, 3; Isa. 64:6; Rom. 3:12, 23).² No one of us can claim to be truly and completely good except God (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). None of us are so good that we deserve to be exempt from the vicissitudes of life. Secondly, it is difficult in some situations to know that something is indeed a bad thing, because God may work a blessing out of what we initially took to be a bad circumstance. We realize in the end that it was not really a bad thing after all.

But let us suspend those theological reservations for the present, because this is a question raised repeatedly in the Bible. Job, Jeremiah, Asaph, Habakkuk, Peter, and James raised this issue, just to name a few. And this is a question that, not adequately answered, has been a hindrance to faith for many persons who have suffered loss. I am addressing today many persons who were deeply and personally impacted by hurricane Katrina, as was I. Perhaps your minds turn immediately to the impact of that disaster on your own personal lives. But I am directing these remarks not just to the impact of Katrina on persons, but to all the many kinds of suffering that invade our lives.

What challenges confront you in your life? Are their problems or health issues that you face in your family? Are you struggling with relational issues? Do financial challenges weigh upon your spirit? Do you wonder how you will ever have the time and energy to complete all these academic assignments on the syllabi you’ve just received in your courses while you work two jobs and serve in a ministry?

If you are here, it is because you feel called into the ministry. You have come here as an obedient response to God’s leadership and direction in your life. And yet, you suffer all these challenges. Some of you had just arrived on the seminary campus, in obedience to a very clear sense of God’s leadership, only to have most of your possessions destroyed by the flood waters that followed hurricane Katrina. Why does God allow such things to happen to His people? This is the same issue that Asaph, a psalmist in the court of David, struggled to understand. The words he penned under the inspiration of the Spirit of God in Psalm 73:1-5 reflect his consternation about this problem:

Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart. But as for me my feet

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² Scriptural quotations are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful; when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; Nor are they plagued like other men.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF EXTREME DEUTERONOMIC THEOLOGY (PS. 73:1)

The claim in verse 1, “Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart,” is an example of one of the oft-repeated themes of the Old Testament, usually described as “Deuteronomistic Theology.” Deuteronomistic Theology asserts that righteousness pays -- that God blesses the faithful and opposes the ungodly. For example, in Deut. 30:16-18, the people of God are told that if they do good and obey God’s commandments, statutes, and laws, then He will bless them, but if they are disobedient then God will punish them. That central affirmation of Deuteronomistic Theology is often repeated in the Wisdom literature of Scripture. In fact, the Psalms begin with just such an affirmation, with a contrast between how God will bless the righteous man but the way of the ungodly man will perish. In fact, Psalm 2 and Psalm 73 stand in interesting apposition to each other. Psalm 1 is the beginning of the first of the five books within the Psalms (Psalms 1-41), and Psalm 73 is the beginning of the third book within the Psalms (Psalms 73-89), the first ten of which are attributed to Asaph. In the construction of the Psalms, then, Psalm 1 and 73 are set as bookends in apposition to each other. Psalm 1 affirms that God is going to bless the righteous man who meditates on God’s law day and night, like a tree planted by a river of water. God is going to bless his life, such that he brings forth fruit in due season and whatsoever he does will prosper. But it is not so for the ungodly, who shall be like the chaff which the wind drives away. They will not stand on the day of judgment.

Psalm 73 begins by echoing this same theme of Deuteronomistic Theology: “Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart.” That is the “Sabbath School” answer that Asaph had been taught by since he was a child. You know that in Sunday School, whatever the question is, a good answer is “Jesus.” A boy was once asked once in Sunday School, “What is it that has a fuzzy tail, eats nuts, and lives in trees?” The boy answered, “It sure sounds like a squirrel, but I know the answer must be Jesus! So much for “Sunday School” answers. The Sabbath School answer that Asaph had been taught was that God is good, especially to the righteous. Asaph was mirroring the Deuteronomistic Theology of Psalm 1.

But then Asaph took a detour from the theology he thought he was supposed to believe. He protested, “But as for me . . .” It becomes immediately apparent that an immense gap has opened up between the standard Deuteronomistic Theology to which Asaph paid lip service, and his own experience. His beliefs and his experience were not matching up very well. In verses 2-12, Asaph cited counterexample after counterexample that seem to indicate that God does not always bless the righteous in Israel and punish the ungodly. In fact, God seems to be letting the ungodly get away with their unrighteousness. These counterexamples flowed from Asaph’s pen like a creek overflowing its banks after a heavy rain. This inconsistency between his belief system and his experience seems to have been

pent up within him for a long time, and he just can't take it anymore. "But as for me" "But as for me"

Have you ever asked that question? "Why me Lord?" "Why did this have to happen to me? We can understand why things would happen to an unrighteous person, of course, but why would You let it happen to a righteous person? Why would You send or allow Katrina to hurt us that badly, to hurt Your churches, to hurt Your work along the Gulf Coast? Why would You allow that to happen?"

Do not feel guilty about challenging God with that question. Many other saints have asked that question. When Job experienced extreme hardship and loss in his life, he cried out to God, "Lord, what's going on? I don't understand! Why?" The book of Job drives this issue home because Job was a particularly righteous man, but in spite of that he lost almost everything. Throughout the book, Job kept asking the "Why?" question. Likewise, the book of Habakkuk takes this issue to a national level. Habakkuk is told by the Lord that the unrighteousness of Israel was going to be punished by their being captured and exiled by the Babylonians. Habakkuk is stunned that God would use an ungodly nation to punish His own people. Habakkuk protests: "Wait a minute! I realize that Your people have been unrighteous, but at least we are better than the Babylonians! Why would You do that? Why would You allow an unrighteous people to chastise a comparatively righteous people?" Habakkuk was asking the "Why?" question. And when the Apostle Paul suffered from his thorn in the flesh, he kept praying for God to remove the thorn in the flesh so that he could be much more effective in God's service, but the answer was "no." Paul was also asking the "Why?" question.

So, the "Why?" question is not a bad question to ask. We have no trouble with Deuteronomic Theology when God is good to his own, or when He punishes evildoers. Nor do we have a problem with sinners suffer the consequences of their sins. We figure that they deserved the punishment they got. Deuteronomic Theology is absolutely true in this sense. God does bless the righteous, and punish the ungodly. But the problem arises is in what we shall call *extreme Deuteronomic Theology*, which attributes a one-to-one correspondence between righteousness and blessing, on the one hand, and sin and suffering on the other. Thus, in extreme Deuteronomic Theology, *every time* something bad happens, it is because of a sin; and *every time* something good happens, it is a reward for some good deed we have done. This kind of Deuteronomic Theology is a commonly held misconception of many people. Whenever something happens, they assume that they are being blessed because of their righteousness, and if something bad happens they assume that they are being punished for their sins.

If you'll allow me to digress just a moment and utilize the language of my discipline of Philosophy, the *logical* problem with extreme Deuteronomic Theology is that it commits a simple logical fallacy. A valid argument (a mixed hypothetical syllogism) would reason in the following way:

- (a) If we obey God, He will bless us.
- (b) We have obeyed God.
- (c) Therefore, He will bless us.

Or,

- (a) If we disobey God, He will punish us.
- (b) We have disobeyed God.
- (c) Therefore, He will punish us.

These basic affirmations of Deuteronomic Theology are valid and true, as affirmed in Scripture. However, while those who affirm extreme Deuteronomic Theology use language that sounds very similar to this valid argument, in fact their argument is invalid because it commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent:

- (a) If we obey God, He will bless us.
- (b) John is blessed in some way.
- (c) Therefore, John is righteous.

Or,

- (a) If we disobey God, He will punish us.
- (b) John is suffering.
- (c) Therefore, John must have disobeyed God.³

Scripture calls extreme Deuteronomic Theology into question in a number of occasions. Job's so-called friends, who imbibed deeply of extreme Deuteronomic Theology, challenged Job to confess his sins, reasoning that he must have been guilty of terrible sins since he had experienced such devastation in his life (Job 3-37). In the end, however, God rebuked the "friends" of Job and blessed Job (Job 42:7-12). Likewise, speaking to people who were desperately dependent on the weather for the success of their crops, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that God sends the sun and the rain on both the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). God does not just bless the agricultural needs of the righteous.

There are three specific examples in the Gospels in which Jesus specifically addressed this issue of extreme Deuteronomic Theology. He first addressed the issue of *moral evil*, when people hurt other people. Evidently some people in the crowd were talking about a recent event in which some Galileans had come down to Jerusalem to worship. For reasons we do not know, Pilate had sent a squadron of soldiers who attacked these Galileans. The crowd, assuming extreme Deuteronomic Theology, evidently assumed that this was God's punishment for these sinful Galileans. Jesus asked them if they supposed

³ If the invalidity of this argument is not immediately obvious to someone who has not studied Logic, note the following parallel invalid argument: the consequent:

- (a) If this animal is a dog, it must have fur.
- (b) This animal has fur.
- (c) Therefore, this animal must be a dog.

Obviously, many other kinds of animals have fur than just dogs, so the conclusion of the argument is clearly invalid. Likewise, not all suffering is divine punishment. For example, Paul's thorn in the flesh was not a divine punishment, but an instrument God used to bless Paul by teaching him dependence on God rather than on the flesh in his ministry.

that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered such things (Luke 13:1-2). If extreme Deuteronomic Theology were true, then this would account for why they suffered in this way. But Jesus said, “I tell you, No. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”(Luke 13:3). These people had walked many miles to come to Jerusalem to worship God. They did not suffer because they were ungodly. They suffered because we live in a fallen world in which anyone can suffer such a tragedy. Jesus specifically rejected the explanation of extreme Deuteronomic Theology regarding moral evil.

Jesus then addressed the issue of suffering due to *natural evil*—suffering that comes from natural disasters such as wind storms and floods. He referenced another fairly recent incident, in which the Tower of Siloam fell on eighteen unfortunate people. Again, Jesus asked if their suffering in this way indicated that these eighteen were the worst sinners in Jerusalem (Luke 13:4). This reminds me of the fact that the police in some cities hosting a Super Bowls have conducted an ingenious “sting” operation in the weeks before the big game. The police send notices to all the people in the area against whom there are outstanding warrants. The notice announces that the recipients have won free Super Bowl tickets. The would-be “winners” are instructed to come to a hotel ballroom at a particular time and place with identification to confirm their identity in order to receive their Super Bowl tickets. When the “winners” confirm their identity, of course, what actually happens is that they are arrested and taken to jail. In a similar way, Jesus was asking His hearers if these eighteen people were in essence the victims of a divine sting operation. God works through mysterious ways to attract all the eighteen most wanted sinners in Jerusalem to the northwest corner of the Tower of Siloam at 3:30 one afternoon. The sinners are told they will win tickets to the Olympic Games. And then God smacks the tower down on them and wipes them all out with one blow. Jesus was asking, “Do you think that is the way God works?” His answer again was, “I tell you, No” (Luke 13:5). These people were not the worst eighteen sinners. They were just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Anyone of us in this fallen world could experience a tragedy like that. Again, Jesus specifically rejected the explanation of extreme Deuteronomic Theology regarding natural evil.

The third example Jesus addressed was *physical evil*—a physical disease or disability. It is particularly interesting because it is His disciples who raise the question this time, and their question clearly indicates that they presuppose extreme Deuteronomic Theology. In the account in John 9, Jesus encountered a man who was blind from birth. This prompted his disciples to ask him whether this man’s blindness was due to his own sin or his parent’s sin. They never even questioned that the blindness might not be the result of sin; they assumed extreme Deuteronomic Theology without question. Their question was about the unique nature of this case – since he was blind at birth, whose fault was it? (John 9:1-2). Jesus’ answer surprised the disciples: “Neither of the above.” It was neither the man’s sin nor the parent’s sin (John 9:3-4). Jesus specifically denied the explanation of extreme Deuteronomic Theology regarding physical evil.

Why did God send or allow Katrina? I don’t know the answer to that question. Ask Him. But I do not accept the explanation of extreme Deuteronomic Theology that many people have suggested -- that God sent this disaster on New Orleans because it is famously such an evil and terrible city. Certainly, God would be within His rights to do so. But I could suggest some other cities whose evil rivals or surpasses that of New Orleans. Others

have suggested that hurricane Katrina was God's punishment on the United States for our participation in the war in Iraq.

There are two indicators that suggest to me that hurricane Katrina was not God's specific punishment for the sins of New Orleans. First, when God sends punishment such as this in scriptural accounts, He typically protects his own people from the punishment (such as protecting those in the land of Goshen from the plagues in Egypt, the deliverance of the people of Israel by the waters of the sea parting in the exodus, and taking the few godly people out of Sodom before the wrath of God fell upon it). In the aftermath of Katrina, however, believers and their churches were hurt at least as badly and in most cases worse than the ungodly, the French Quarter, and the casinos. Second, such a view of divine punishment suggests a very low view of the sovereignty of God. A year after Katrina, half of the churches in the immediate New Orleans area have been forced to close their doors, and those which remain are struggling to survive with a fragment of their membership. One of the largest seminaries in the world has been disrupted and its ministry hindered, and its students and faculty have suffered grievous losses of personal property. Meanwhile, the infamous French Quarter was hardly damaged at all by the storm, and the casinos all along the Gulf Coast have begun gobbling up property that was unavailable to them before the storm. If this God they speak of were trying to knock sin out of New Orleans, He missed and hit a lot of His own instead. This picture of God as an impotent, bumbling fool is an insult to the sovereignty of God, I find that conclusion absolutely unacceptable.

God is sovereign, and He is still on His throne. He never misses. He knew from timeless infinity that on August 29, 2005, the atmospheric conditions in the Gulf region were such that a great hurricane would strike the Gulf Coast. He created the laws governing those atmospheric conditions. He knew the hurt and damage the hurricane would cause, but He allowed these natural laws to produce their normal effects. He could have intervened had it been His will, but He chose not to change the course of the storm. However, He prepared thousands of Baptists and other Christians to come provide relief and help in the name of Christ to the praise of His glory. None of this was a surprise to God, and He has woven it into His plan for the redemption of many souls before time began.

THE SHORT TERM PERSPECTIVE

(PS. 73:2-16)

It is not surprising, however, that many of God's children might ask why He allowed hurricane Katrina to happen, and especially why He did not save their houses, their business, or their churches. It is not surprising, when they see the prosperity of the drug lords, the French Quarter strip clubs, and the casinos, that they wonder why God seemed to spare these ungodly people while harming His own people. But this "Why?" question is precisely the issue that Asaph was dealing with so many years ago. "Why, God? Why am I suffering?" As he looked around, Asaph saw so many ways that God appeared to be blessing the ungodly in ways that He was not blessing Asaph. Knowing that he was supposed to believe that God is good to the pure in heart in Israel, Asaph could not square this with his experience. He felt his faith begin to slip away (Ps. 73:2). He began itemizing his complaints in counterexample after counterexample.

We do not know exactly which ungodly persons Asaph had in mind in his complaints. Perhaps he was simply observing ungodly persons who lived around Jerusalem. He may have been thinking about the insurgents within Israel who threatened the stability of King David's rule. Or, he may have been thinking about the ungodly nations around them—the Syrians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians. Whatever the identity of the ungodly whom Asaph was addressing, he saw them prospering in a way he was not, and he found this difficult to fit within his theology. In his *short term perspective*, it seemed that there was no justice in this life.

His first complaint regarded the prosperity of the wicked. He was envious of their prosperity (Ps. 73:3). In fact, Asaph alleged that the ungodly appeared to have anything that their heart could desire, and they were so wealthy that their eyes bulged with abundance (Ps. 73:7). In our day, of course, we do not think of being obese as a sign of blessing, but in that day, in which starvation was an ever-present reality, to have such abundance that you were fat was a sign of wealth and blessing. To Asaph, the ungodly were lapping up luxury (Ps. 73:10), enjoying their leisure while their riches kept increasing (Ps. 73:12).

Not only were the ungodly experiencing prosperity, but Asaph noted that they were healthy as well. The ungodly were strong and did not seem to suffer the typical burdens and struggles that most people face (Ps. 73:4-5). Asaph found it difficult to accept that people in his family were facing all kinds of medical challenges, while his ungodly neighbors seemed to never get sick. Why, God?

Asaph's third complaint concerned the arrogance of the wicked. Not only was their behavior ungodly, but they had an arrogant, prideful attitude that was an offence to God. Asaph described the ungodly as being dressed with a necklace of pride and a garment of violence (Ps. 73:6). He characterizes these unrighteous persons as having callous hearts and scoffing mouths as they bulldoze anyone who gets in their way. They were proud of their ungodliness, and departed themselves with arrogance. They even practiced blasphemy against God. They raised their mouth to heaven and challenged God (Ps. 73:9). They were dismissive of God, saying, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" (Ps. 73:11). These ungodly people didn't care what God thought. They didn't care what God thought. God was the furthest thing from their minds. They lived their lives totally without reference to God and His will for their lives.

When Asaph pondered these realities, he just could not understand it (Ps. 73:16). It made no sense. It did not fit within his belief system or theology. This tension between his beliefs and his experience plagued him and tormented him (Ps. 73:14). It appeared to Asaph that all his work for the Lord, all his righteousness was in vain (Ps. 14:13). It appeared in the short term that there was no reward for righteousness, and no punishment for the wicked. Asaph found these thoughts very painful and confusing (Ps. 73:16). "But as for me," he said, "my feet had almost stumbled . . ." In this short term perspective, life seems very unfair.

Do some similar thoughts trouble you and me? As persons called into the ministry, we have committed our lives. We have made sacrifices. We see people from our high school and college graduating classes who are making a lot of money in business, and here you we struggling with financial challenges. We see people living an ungodly lifestyle who

are living the life of luxury. We see the people who own casinos, sell drugs, or run night clubs, driving around in chauffeured limousines and living in mansions. On the other hand, we who have dedicated our lives to serving God may be just eking by financially. While we may be experiencing medical problems ourselves or in our families, the ungodly seem to have no problems at all. The ungodly seem to enjoy this apparently blessed life despite living a totally ungodly lifestyle, and despite their callous arrogance and their blasphemy against God. What is going on here? How can they get away with this? In the short term perspective, it appears that life just isn't fair. The ungodly get away with their unrighteousness, and righteousness does not seem to pay.

THE LONG TERM PERSPECTIVE (PS. 73:17-20)

Asaph was troubled within his soul because his determined efforts to live a good righteous life seemed to go have gone unrewarded. Emotionally he was stuck on the horns of the dilemma that the ungodly went unpunished and the righteous went unrewarded. He didn't understand it, didn't know what to say about it, didn't know how to explain it (Ps. 73:15-16). "Until . . . !" It was painful and he couldn't accept it "Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I understood their end" (Ps. 73:17). Asaph's perspective totally changed when he went into the temple, into the sanctuary of God. Asaph went to the right place to find an answer to the dilemma he faced. We should, like Asaph, lay our problems before God. We should not imagine that God does not know when we have an emotional struggle or an intellectual obstacle in our faith. We should not run away from Him with our problems, but rather we should run to Him with our problems.

When Asaph had that experience with God, he came to see things in a totally different perspective. He was looking only from within the short term perspective, and in this life there is not always justice. But God gave him a vision of the long term, from the perspective of eternity. In that *long term perspective*, he came to realize that people may seem to be getting ahead by cheating and by unrighteous acts, but in fact, they are not getting away with it. In the long run, they are going to suffer for the choices that they have made. Asaph began to realize that the ungodly people whom he previously had envied were in fact to be pitied. He began to feel compassion for them, when before he had felt envious of them, because now Asaph realized what was going to happen to them in the long run. As the wise proverb says, "There's a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12). Asaph now recognized that it was not his own feet that were slipping (Ps. 73:2), but it was the ungodly whom God had set in slippery places (Ps. 73:18). Asaph saw how vulnerable the ungodly were to divine punishment: "You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors" (Ps. 73:18-19). In the end, God will destroy them and they will perish (Ps. 73:27).

As Asaph reflected on the destiny of the ungodly, he also caught a vision of the future that God has promised His children. Somewhat echoing Psalm 23, Asaph realized that God walks beside him and uphold him each day of his life (Ps. 73:23), but also "afterward receive me to glory" (Ps. 73:24). This life is in God's hands, and the life to come is in God's hands.

The future God has promised His own children is affirmed in so many verses in Scripture. The Apostle Paul described it in these glorious words: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). And Paul perfectly summarized the long term perspective in his words to the Romans: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

In the short term perspective, it looks like the ungodly are getting ahead. But in the long term perspective, we realize that their destiny is very grim. Suppose you were along in your old car with about 100,000 miles on it, dutifully driving the speed limit because you can't afford to get a ticket. And then here comes a new bright red sports car zooming past you. He honks on the way by because you have been an impediment to his driving a hundred miles an hour. What is your reaction? You get mad. First of all, you are envious of the snazzy new red sports car. Secondly, you would like to be able to drive a hundred miles an hour and reach your destination ten minutes early. So you grumble to yourself about the cost of righteousness as you're driving along. And then, up ahead of you, you see those glorious red and blue lights. That red sports car has been stopped by the police. Justice! And as you pass him, driving your dutiful 55 miles per hour, you smile and wave, thinking, “Praise the Lord! Righteousness pays!”

A person speeding can get away with it driving a hundred miles an hour for the first mile, the second mile, or the third mile, but if he keeps driving at that speed, eventually he is going to get a ticket and go to jail. It's inevitable. This long term perspective is the vision that Asaph caught when he came into the sanctuary of God -- however the ungodly seem to be getting ahead in this life, in the end they will receive their due punishment. Life may not seem fair in the short term perspective, but in the long term perspective it is fair. If there is not justice in this life, there will be justice in the life to come. This realization led Asaph to reaffirm his confidence in the sovereignty and sufficiency of God and in the justice of God. In the end, he realized, God is going to right the wrongs. In the end, God is going to punish unrighteousness and reward righteousness. In the end, there is going to be justice, and even mercy.

THE INNER PERSPECTIVE (Ps. 73:21-28)

After Asaph encountered God in the temple, his perspective on life changed. He recognized the inadequacy of his short term perspective, and caught a vision of the long term perspective. He was embarrassed for his shortsightedness and lack of faith. His heart was grieved and his mind was vexed because he was so foolish and ignorant about these matters (Ps. 73:21). He felt as stupid as a beast before God (Ps. 73:22). One might expect the psalm to stop here with Asaph's change of perspective. But it doesn't. Something more profound changed within Asaph that we might call the *inner perspective*. Having resolved his doubts about God's fairness, Asaph's priorities and his whole attitude toward life changed. *Before*, what had been really important to him and what he had yearned for was better circumstances. *Now* he yearned for a closer walk with God. Asaph now recognized the presence of God through his daily walk: “I am continually with you. You hold me by my

right hand. You will guide me with your counsel” (Ps. 73:23-25). Asaph now cherished and yearned for this daily walk with the Lord, not for those circumstances that had so troubled him before. *Before*, Asaph had defined “good” as having money, health, and things. *Now* he defined “good” as nearness to God: “it is good for me to draw near to God” (Ps. 73:27). Asaph now recognized that nearness to God is the ultimate good, even better than health and wealth. *Before*, Asaph sought satisfaction in possessions and things. *Now* he found satisfaction in God alone. As he exclaimed, “Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon the earth that I desire besides You. My heart and my flesh fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25-26). In the end, Asaph came to reaffirm from the heart what he had paid lip service to in the beginning, that God truly is good to His people (Ps. 73:1, 27).

Do note what change took place. God did not change. Asaph’s circumstances did not change. What changed was Asaph. He was a changed man, with new priorities and a new perspective. He had found that God was His portion, that God alone was enough.

Blessed are those persons who discover God as their portion! Be mindful of what your portion is, what it is that satisfies you. One of the most important issues in life is that we have the right treasure, and that we treasure the right treasure. God is the only treasure really worth treasuring. God is all-sufficient. He is enough. He is our portion forever.

Many of you know the background of the hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul.” It was penned by the words of a Chicago businessman named Horatio Spafford.⁴ Spafford was a fairly wealthy businessman who was heavily invested in real estate until the Chicago fire, which destroyed most of his possessions. Soon afterward, he tragically also lost a four-year old son also. The Spafford family was still reeling from these losses in the early 1870s when he decided to go to England for a Dwight L. Moody revival. Spafford was a supporter of Dwight L. Moody and his evangelistic campaigns, and Moody was having an evangelistic campaign in London. Since Spafford had some business deals to wrap up, he sent his wife Anna and his four daughters on ahead, planning to take the next ship and join them in London. Tragically, the ship that Anna and the four daughters took, the *Ville du Havre*, crashed into an English vessel and sank in the Atlantic on that cold November night. The witnesses say the steamship sank in twelve minutes, killing 126 passengers. Anna was knocked unconscious, but was rescued out of the sea and was one of the few passengers who survived. The four daughters, however--Annie, Maggie, Bessie, and Tanetta--all died. When Anna reached land, she sent a Western Union telegraph to her husband Horatio that began with the haunting words “Saved alone,” for all the others had been lost. Spafford took the next ship across that Atlantic to join his wife and comfort her. Reflecting back on that experience, a daughter who was born later to the Spaffords said it was during this journey, as the vessel neared the section of the Atlantic where the *Ville du Havre* had gone down, that Horatio Spafford wrote on a page of hotel stationary the words of that song that have come to mean so much to many of us, “It Is Well With My Soul.”⁵ In the midst of all

⁴ The well-documented and oft-retold story about the writing of “It Is Well with My Soul” is outlined in William J. Reynolds, ed., *Companion to the Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Broadman, 1976), 241-242, 433; or online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horatio_Spafford or at <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/i/t/i/itiswell.htm>.

his trials, as Spafford saw the place that his four daughters had been lost, still recovering from losing his son and from losing his wealth in the Chicago fire, but even in the midst of these tragedies, he found God as his portion. God was his treasure. And he could say, “It Is Well with My Soul.”

Many of you whom I am addressing have recently experienced the loss of your possessions. Perhaps you have also experienced loss of family members. You may also face health challenges or financial challenges. But can you say, “It is well with my soul”? Can you say with Asaph, “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever”? Trust God with your life, and make Him your portion. He is more than enough to satisfy all your needs.

⁵ During the chapel message, pictures of Spafford, his family, the sinking of the *Ville du Havre*, the telegram from Anna to Horatio, and the manuscript on which Spafford penned the words for “It Is Well with My Soul” were projected on a screen. These images can be seen at: <http://aquarelles.com/spafford/html/manuscript.html>; <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/images/ac0005s.jpg>; <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/images/ac0001s.jpg>; and <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/images/ac0006s.jpg>.