

“From ‘Singing the Blues’ to ‘Praising the Lord’”

Psalm 13

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

Delivered at Oakland Christian Church, July 2, 2017

Growing up on the windswept High Plains, I often listened to the radio at night before falling asleep. One of the news broadcasters I recall hearing regularly was Paul Harvey. He had a catch phrase that perhaps some of you also recall: “And now, the rest of the story.” Today, we will conclude our service with the well-known hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul.” Would you like to know “the rest of the story” about that hymn?

Horatio Spafford, a prominent and prosperous Chicago lawyer, was a devout Presbyterian elder and Sunday School teacher, who had been deeply involved in the abolitionist movement and other reform movements of his day. In October 1871, financial tragedy struck his family when the terrible “Great Fire of Chicago” reduced much of the city to ashes, including the northern suburbs where Spafford was heavily invested in real estate.

Two years later, an even greater tragedy struck. He had planned to take his family on an extended vacation in Europe for his wife’s health. At the last minute, he was detained on business, so he sent his wife, Anna, and their four daughters ahead, planning to follow them shortly. On November 21, 1873, the ship carrying his family was rammed by another ship and sank in only 11 minutes. Anna was found unconscious, floating on a plank of wood, but all four daughters perished.

Distraught, Horatio rushed to join his wife who, along with the other survivors, had been taken to England. As he passed the location of the shipwreck, he penned the famous hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul.”

Now you’d think their church in Chicago, a church Horatio had helped build and served as an elder, would have enfolded the bereaved parents with love and comfort. But alas, no. Rumors began swirling around in the church that there must be something evil about the Spaffords or God wouldn’t have inflicted such a heavy punishment on them. Can you believe it? This kind of sick theology had been vigorously condemned by the writers of Ecclesiastes, the Book of Job, and by Jesus himself! Nevertheless, such erroneous thinking persists—even to this day in some circles.

So, did Horatio and Anna abandon God in the midst of their sorrow? In no way! They started a prayer meeting at their house along with several fellow church members who had also left the theologically confused and unloving church. Now, what grew out of that prayer meeting is truly amazing—a phenomenal work of God—but you’ll have to wait until next week to hear “the *rest* of the rest of the story.”¹

Perhaps you are wondering, how can we explain the remarkable faithfulness of the Spaffords after their terrible, terrible loss and the way they were treated by their church? The answer to that question is found in today's scripture lesson from the Psalms.

Having served as a New Testament professor for many years, I haven't had occasion to preach many sermons from the Psalms, but I felt especially drawn to the lectionary readings from the Psalter for this week and next week.

The word "Psalms" literally means "songs accompanied by stringed instruments." The Book of Psalms was the hymnal of ancient Israel to be sung to the accompaniment of instruments like the ten-stringed *asor*, the *kinnor* or lyre, and the larger *nevel* or harp. The Psalms were written over many centuries, stretching from the days of David (ca. 1000 BCE) to after the Babylonian Exile (ca. 350 BCE). The Book of Psalms is actually a collection of five books, each ending with a doxology. The 150 individual psalms are of five types or genres: hymns of praise, laments, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms.²

Psalm 13, our lesson for today, is one of over 50 laments in the Book of Psalms—over one-third of the Psalter! Laments are prayers of people who are deep down in what we might today call "the blues." The biblical lament is written in four formal parts: the complaint, the request for help, the affirmation of trust in God, and the formal vow or promise to praise God. Let's examine each part of this psalm.

The complaint begins with the writer's own feelings, and then moves on to complaints about God and the behavior of other people, who are often simply referred to by the ambiguous expression, "my enemies." Let's listen again to the complaint portion of Psalm 13.

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

The next stage of the lament is the request for help. Let me offer a modern translation of the request in Psalm 13.

*Look at me! Answer me, O Lord my God!
Restore my vitality or I will die!
Don't let my enemy say, "I have defeated him!"
Don't let my enemy gloat over my downfall.*

The turning point of the lament is the affirmation, an affirmation that comes to the Psalmist's lips when he recalls God's steadfast love. The expression "steadfast love," or *hesed*, is the Hebrew Bible's equivalent of the spiritual truth referred to in the New Testament as "grace." God's love is, indeed, steadfast—unconditional and never-ending. Let's hear again the affirmation of Psalm 13.

*But I trust in your steadfast love;
My heart rejoices in your salvation.*

The literary progression revealed in the Psalms of Lament—from complaint, through request, then affirmation—concludes in the vow to praise God. This progression reveals a deep spiritual and psychological truth. The Psalms of Lament lead us from where we are—“singing the blues”—to where we want to be—“praising the Lord” joyfully from the depths of our hearts. And so the Psalmist sings:

*I will sing to the Lord,
Because he has dealt bountifully with me!*

But notice this spiritual truth: we are not expected to praise God while in a state of depression, or from a sugar-coated denial of our despair—“Oh (sigh), everything’s okay.” No. God is the ultimate realist. Things are not always okay; sometimes it is necessary and right to “sing the blues.” But I encourage you to recall last week’s scripture lesson: “Ishmael: God hears.” I also invite you to recall Alfred North Whitehead’s beautiful witness: “God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands.”³

No, God does not expect us to deny our experience of singing the blues. On the contrary, God meets us right where we are, even if we’re in the very depths of despair—and God sings the blues right along with us! “God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands.” But that’s not all; the good news gets even better: God doesn’t leave us in our despair, singing the blues. Lovingly, God gently guides us back to joyfulness by helping us to recall God’s steadfast love—God’s unconditional and never-ending love. What an awesome and caring God! As the Psalmist says: Praise the Lord!

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ Library of Congress, *The American Colony in Jerusalem*. Web.

² Chris Haslam, *Comments*, Revised Common Lectionary Commentary, Third Sunday after Pentecost - June 29, 2014. Web.

³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978; New York: Macmillan, 1927) 351.