

Celebrate God's Forgetful Forgiveness

‡ **Out with the old** (vv.31,32)

‡ **In with the new** (vv.33,34)

In the name of Jesus, God's personal Covenant with us, dearly redeemed children of the Reformation:

We are blessed by hymns not written by Lutherans. But can we say they were children of the Lutheran Reformation? Yes, as long as they express the solid conviction that Christ alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life. "It Is Well With My Soul," was sung by our choir this Reformation Sunday morning. Its beautiful words by Horatio G. Spafford (1828-1888), coupled with music by a man aptly named Philip Bliss (1838-1876), express profound truths animating Dr. Martin in the Lutheran Reformation. Such melodious lyrics **Celebrate God's Forgetful Forgiveness**, especially against the tragic backdrop of their writing. But the later life of Horatio G. Spafford suggests he needed more of the Lutheran Reformation to keep **Out with the old** and **In with the new**. Friends of Martin Luther were concerned about the same potential deviation as one fellow Christian asked him on his deathbed, "Brother Martin, do you still hold to the truths of the Holy Scriptures which you have taught for all these years?" The dying doctor showed his faith alive and well: "Yes," Luther replied, then died in peace. So may we be ever true to God's truth, revived in the Lutheran Reformation.

‡ **Out with the old** (vv.31,32)

Many of you remember Jeremiah, the God-inspired author of our text, as "the weeping 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. What could dry their tears or heal their broken hearts?

Hebrew writing style climaxes in the middle. Our text is at the middle mountain peak of Jeremiah's long scroll. Out of the gloom of God's law Chapter 29 fires up the lights in a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon: "*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*" (29:11 NIV) Chapters 30-33 are known as Jeremiah's *Book of Comfort*. And four times in Chapter 31, the ancient Hebrews heard הנה, repetition our English translators often ignore. הנה means "Behold!" or "Look at this!" as the Holy Spirit spotlights God's gracious promises. So, הנה, "*the time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,*" declares the LORD.

That was Luther's argument against Rome's paper indulgences trying to sell forgiveness. Daily repentance is needed because we constantly break the Old Covenant from Mount Sinai, summarized in the Ten Commandments. God's holy, unchangeable will for all people He repeats in the New Testament. God's Son Jesus Christ summarizes God's will for us that without fail we are to "*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself.*" (Luke 10:27 NIV) Unless we think about God and your neighbor all the time with perfect love and joy, we are condemned with the Israelites under Sinai's Old Covenant because we break it constantly by our ceaseless sins. Down in the terrors of conscience we need the Good News shining joy for Luther in the "*righteousness from God [that] comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*" (Romans 3:22 NIV) Faith in Christ alone makes one a child of the Reformation.

By faith alone Horatio G. Spafford wrote “It Is Well With My Soul” though his heart was broken. As a successful businessman and lawyer in Chicago, Horatio seemed to have it all. His wife and children shared in Evangelical missions and gospel musicians. They planned to develop their real estate down by Lake Michigan hoping for more blessings from above. But death came to their only son. Then the raging Chicago Fire of 1871, wiped out more dreams. Hoping for some rest, Horatio planned a family trip to help a Christian mission in England. Last minute business kept him home, but he put his wife and four daughters on the ship as scheduled, planning to follow in a few days. Almost across the Atlantic, a collision with another ship sank their vessel in twelve minutes. A few days later anxious Horatio received a telegraph from his wife with two words: “Saved alone.” On the English shore grieving together he later wrote what faith alone can see: “*When peace like a river, attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll – Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, ‘It is well, it is well with my soul.’*” “**Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.**” (Hebrews 11:1 KJV) And by faith alone we gladly go with God **Out with the old** of human experience and sinful works, and....

✠ In with the new (vv.33,34)

Some might ask, “What did this Christian man and his wife do to deserve the loss of their only son and all their daughters too – on a mission trip for God’s sake?” But faith alone can hear God’s answer of silence to sufferers like Job who could not call God the Almighty to account. Repentance from sin and faith in God’s forgiveness is always called for in the midst of grief too. Though no specific sin may cause such trauma in the believer’s life, we know that grief was not God’s will from the beginning. As Jeremiah would later write in his Lamentations over Jerusalem’s destruction: “**[God] does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.**” (3:33 NIV) But in our grief God is glorified and we learn to know Him better as the God “**who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.**” (2 Corinthians 1:4 NIV)

Martin Luther’s spiritual healing from Scripture taught him comfort is not based on what we do. The harder he tried to please God the more damned depressed he felt like Mother Theresa in her now published letters where she wrote in 1953: “There is such a terrible darkness within me as if everything is dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started ‘the work.’”¹ Luther wrote about his works as a poor Augustinian monk: “Yet deep and deeper still I fell; life had become a living hell, so firmly sin possessed me.” (CW 377:2) The righteousness of works can only depress unless good works are done by faith out of thankfulness that we are saved by grace alone. For the LORD told His ancient Remnant of believers through Jeremiah: “**This is the covenant I will make with the house 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. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,**” declares the LORD. “**For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.**” That’s the **Forgetful Forgiveness** of God we **Celebrate** by God’s grace today.

Sadly, Horatio G. Spafford lost sight of this later in life. Some mental disturbance took him to Jerusalem under the strange delusion that he was a second Messiah.² We don’t know whether he came back to repentant faith in time to meet the one true crucified and risen Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. But the need for the Lutheran Reformation *by Scripture alone* surely shines through Luther’s darkest days, Mother Theresa’s hidden guilt and fear, as well as the loss of faith’s confidence in the lives of many talented musicians and hymn writers. These testify to our need for reformation today in the new hearts *Christ alone* can give – *by grace alone, through faith alone, in Scripture alone*. Then we can keep singing, “It Is Well With My Soul,” as we **Celebrate God’s Forgetful Forgiveness**. Amen.

¹ Helen Kennedy, *New York Daily News*. Reprinted in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, August 2007.

²² Osbeck, Kenneth W. *101 Hymn Stories*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1979), pp. 126-128.