

It Is Well with My Soul

In the name of Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, dearly redeemed children of God:

One of my brothers was really good at drawing cartoons of our professors. And some of them actually thought they were funny. Each one had a *tell*, some characteristic unique to him, like one who never looked directly at the class. College freshmen would climb out the window then come back around into class without a word from the good professor.

Teaching high school, I naively thought I would not have a *tell*. Until one day when a student was going on about something, another student said about the teacher, “He’s giving you *the look*.” Not knowing how to answer, I was praying. Sure enough, *the look* was mine.

Did your mother ever give you *the look*? Family has always been at the heart of God’s Word. He wants **“godly offspring.”** (Malachi 2:15; Hebrews 2:14-18) Fact is, that without loving discipline, no child can grow up to be as devoted to their parents as I’ve seen in the Jagger family. Your loving care goes back to that moment when God adopted you into His family by baptism. The food, clothing and shelter your parents provided, along with faithful instruction in God’s Word and their godly example are all evidence of God’s loving care for you. It’s beautiful to visit a member going home to Jesus, and find a son and daughter-in-law along with three grandchildren and a girlfriend – all there, all loving, all consoling a faith-sister like Peggy. I’d like to think that’s Christ in you. And we have a beautiful Savior.

Our beautiful Savior lived in David too, the sweet Psalmist of Israel, inspired by God to write Psalm 27. **“The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?”** (Psalm 27:1 EHV¹)

Memory loss, dementia, Alzheimer’s – whatever they call it, is a frightening experience. In the early stages my mother found her mom, Nani, on her bed crying. “What’s wrong, Mom?” “I just can’t remember anything!” A book by a Presbyterian pastor, *My Journey into Alzheimer’s*, told of his distress, not being able to remember Bible passages. Finally he recalled just one: **“Rest in the LORD.”** (Psalm 37:7 KJV) If you trust God’s Word on Baptism, you have all the more reason to **rest in the LORD** like an infant unaware of anything but the beating heart of mother. God’s love for you is so deep and rich.

Shaking hands after worship, Peggy would sometimes give me a *look*, but it wasn’t fear. There was disappointment for sure, knowing her memory was failing, but I also saw determination, confidence. It’s already there in my first note for Peggy dating back to 2004. She helped with a VBS canvass of our neighborhoods, out on the street in the early days of New Life. Going door-to-door inviting families and children to come to Vacation Bible School, takes faith, beautiful confidence in our beautiful Savior.

Peggy and Earl made it a point to be at church as much as they could while she could still come. **“One thing I ask from the LORD. This is what I seek: that I live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD, and to seek him in his temple.”** (Psalm 27:4 EHV) Shaking hands, I’d ask her, “Do you feel as good as you look?” She would answer with a look that said it all. Not fear, mostly just quiet resignation that said, “God’s got this. “

Hear me, O LORD. With my voice I call. Be merciful to me and answer me. When you say, “Seek my face,” my heart says to you, “Your face, LORD, I will seek.” Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger. You have been my help. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God who saves me. If my father and my mother abandoned me, the Lord would take me in.” (27:7–10)

¹ Holy Bible: Evangelical Heritage Version. (2019). Northwestern Publishing House. (1-800-662-6022)

Why would David fear God's angry look? Or worse yet, God's face turned away? You may remember what happened when David stayed behind in Jerusalem instead of going off to fight the LORD's battles that spring. Too much time, power, riches, good looks – David committed adultery, then tried to cover it up with murder. Later he confessed to be ***“sinful when my mother conceived me.”*** (Psalm 51:5)

Jesus' disciple Peter trusted his determination, certain he'd never deny his Lord Jesus. Ignoring Jesus' warnings, Peter was swearing the third time that he did not know Jesus. It didn't take an army, just a servant girl. ***At that very moment, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the Lord's word, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today you will deny me three times.” He went outside and wept bitterly.***” (Luke 22:61fEHV)

Yet Peter did not despair like Judas. Peter waited for the Lord until Jesus reinstated him on the shores of the Sea of Galilee – ***“Feed my lambs....Be a shepherd for my sheep....Feed my sheep.”*** (John 21:15-17) When you read Peter's first and second epistles in the New Testament, he is much more humble. Repentant faith is itself a beautiful gift of God, trusting in our beautiful Savior Jesus.

In one way or another we've all asked for God's special care and direction to give God's loving care to Peggy and now to Earl. As David wrote, ***“LORD, teach me your way, and lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. Do not give me up to the desire of my foes, because false witnesses rise up against me, and so do those who breathe out violence.”*** (Psalm 27:11f) It is amazing how the dear Holy Spirit guards our hearts and minds by His Word and sacraments. ***“The Angel of the LORD camps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.”*** (Psalm 34:7 EHV) We trust His loving promise, ***“I will never leave you or forsake you.”*** (Hebrews 13:5 ESV)

In the last months especially, we were all hoping for *the look* from Peggy, that light of recognition in her eyes that said, “I know who you are. I love you.” Sometimes the Lord only leaves part of *the look*. Ronald Reagan knew one of his sons only as, “that man who gives me hugs.” A dear aunt of mine, couldn't remember her estranged daughter, only “that nice lady who visits us.” God can turn heartaches into heartwarming moments of His loving *look* to give us peace until we meet again.

Peggy's last looks to me were amazing. A guitarist was singing, “This Land is Your Land,” and other favorites while Peggy sat quietly at the back of the room. I sat next to her and sang along. When the music stopped, she gave me such a huge smile. A look of recognition? I wasn't sure. So I held her hand and said Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd”; the Lord's Prayer and gave her the blessing. All the while wondering how much she was taking in. The Holy Spirit is so awesome at these times deep down in your soul, far deeper than your mind and heart. Once more Peggy smiled so sweetly. I couldn't help remembering our youngest as a newborn, lying in her mother's arms while they kept looking at each other for hours. Peggy is now lying in the arms of Jesus, held close to His loving heart, resting in the LORD.

So often God in His magnificent grace turns the tightest tragedies into the most wide open blessings. “Jesus” means Savior. And *to save* in Old Testament Hebrew is **יָשָׁה** (Yashah), *to make a wide way* especially through deep grief and pain. We saw it in our first Reading (Job 19:23-27) and the Gospel (John 11:27-27). We will sing it in our closing hymn as the LORD our Savior teaches us in His school of grace to live and learn and love this last verse: ***“Wait for the LORD. Be strong and take heart, and wait for the LORD!”*** (Psalm 27:14 EHV)

Maybe you know the story of Philip Bliss writing so many tunes for Christian songs like this. He went home to heavenly bliss with his family in 1876, as their Christmas train plunged with a broken wooden bridge and burned. It's so confusing for those on the outside looking in!

Lawyer, hymnwriter Horatio Spafford lost everything in the Chicago Fire. A telegram from his wife in Europe said, “Saved alone.” As he sailed to join her across the Atlantic, the captain said, “This is near the spot” – where their ship sank and his four daughters went home to heaven. “It Is Well with My Soul.” In Christ alone: “The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace.” Amen.