

Hosea 5:15-6:3

¹⁵I will go. I will return to my place
until they admit their guilt and seek my face.
In their distress they will earnestly seek me.

Israel's Need to Return to the LORD

6 Come, let us return to the LORD.
For he has torn us to pieces,
but he will heal us.
He has struck us,
but he will bandage our wounds.

²After two days he will revive us.
On the third day he will raise us up,
so that we may live in his presence.

³Let us acknowledge the LORD.
Let us pursue knowledge of the LORD.
As surely as the sun rises,
the LORD will appear.
He will come to us like a heavy rain,
like the spring rain that waters the earth.

Peace Like a River

I.

It was a tragic time. Many lost their lives. Others lost everything—or nearly everything—they had. 100,000 people were left homeless. The event was the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

A certain lawyer and business man was one of those who lost much of his personal wealth in the Great Fire. His family was devastated, but he still had some means remaining. He still had some things to wrap up in Chicago, but he sent his wife and children to Europe, planning to join them later.

The family's ship didn't make it to Europe. During the Atlantic crossing, their ship was struck by another and sank. 226 passengers lost their lives, including his four children. His wife survived.

"Come, let us return to the LORD. For he has torn us to pieces, but he will heal us. He has struck us, but he will bandage our wounds" (Hosea 6:1, EHV).

The man's name in the story I just told was Horatio Spafford. Do you think he felt like the people of Israel felt? Torn to pieces. Struck down?

Spafford was a God-fearing man. He had been active in his church before all these incidents. He had served as a director and trustee for a seminary in Chicago. With all the tragedy he had faced, some of the members of his church began to wonder what kind of secret sins he had committed that God was punishing him for.

God says in our text: "I will go. I will return to my place until they admit their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will earnestly seek me" (Hosea 5:15, EHV). God talks about the sin of the people. He said he would withdraw from them to give them an opportunity to come to grips with their sin—to think about their sin—to acknowledge their sin. Sometimes people need to hit rock bottom before they can admit their problem and return to the Lord.

Is that what Horatio Spafford needed?

II.

Today's tragedy is world-wide, rather than a fire in Chicago. Do you ever wonder if God is calling people to repentance in times of crisis? Do you wonder if he is doing that now, with everything that is affecting each one of us?

You *have been* affected. Everyone has. Your children are out of school. Many workplaces have been forced to shut down. Others are working with a skeleton crew. Still others are swamped, like the medical community, but in ways they had not foreseen, and in circumstances that they couldn't really plan for or prepare for. Most events of this kind are somewhat localized. Supplies can be sent in from other places. This time, *every* place has these same medical needs. *Every* place has to figure out how to deal with a viral disease.

How do you react to a worldwide pandemic? Not the medical community, not the federal or state governments, or even the local government, not the business world—*you*.

So many things that were so important two weeks ago are meaningless now, aren't they? You might have been looking forward to the NCAA tournament, and preparing your bracket to see how well *you* would predict the outcomes of the games verses everyone else. Maybe you were planing a trip or a wedding or some other life event.

It all changed. Our situation changes from day to day, and even moment to moment.

If you are a person who likes to plan ahead for every contingency, this is throwing you into turmoil. No one could plan for this. There is so much that you just have to learn to roll with as the days and weeks go by.

God doesn't punish people with the problems of this world. Horatio Spafford wasn't being punished for some secret and specific horrendous sin in his life against God. *You* aren't being punished today for specific sins in your life.

But God *does* use time of tragedy to urge us to take a closer look at life. What is *really* important? Was it really the NCAA tournament? Where have your priorities been? Were they self-centered, rather than God-centered?

And, oh, by-the-way, were you looking—or *are* you looking—for deliverance from the troubles of life, from the current pandemic, or from the disease of sin? Have you focused your attention on all the enjoyment you have had—and expect to have—in *this* life, or do you look to an eternal future?

Perhaps God *is* calling, even through adversity.

As for Horatio Spafford, when he heard about the tragic loss of his children, he got on a ship to go and be with his wife. As *his* ship crossed the Atlantic, the ship's captain pointed out the spot where the tragedy occurred that took the lives of his children.

What do you think his reaction was like? Anger with God for taking his children? Questioning God about what sins he might have committed? Did he turn away *from* God because the events of the day were too overwhelming?

Quite the contrary. Moved by that incident, Horatio Spafford wrote a hymn. It appears in the Christian Worship Supplement. Hymn 760—When Peace Like a River. The refrain intones: "It is well with my soul. It is well with my soul."

III.

How can *this* time be well with your soul? Can you have Spafford's same attitude?

"After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, so that we may live in his presence" (Hosea 6:2, EHV).

When will God's hand come and relieve us from distress? After two days, on the third day are poetic ways of indicating an indefinite period of time. When? Soon. When is soon? Soon.

Peter said in his Second Letter: "For the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 'The Lord is not slow to do what he promised, as some consider slowness' (2 Peter 3:8-9, EHV). *You* would probably like this thing to be over with today. *Yesterday* would have been even better. My feelings would be the same.

But God will do what he has promised. He will not be slow about it, as some consider slowness, but he will deliver us in the way *he* sees best, at the *time* he sees best.

Here is what Horatio Spafford wrote in the first verse of his 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.”

Whatever rolls your way, the Lord has taught you to say, “it is well with my soul.” Why? What makes things “well with your soul”? “After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, so that we may live in his presence” (Hosea 6:2, EHV). While this is not a clear allusion to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead on Easter morning, it certainly makes us think of it, doesn’t it? The third day. There is a promise that the Lord will raise us up. Resurrection from the dead? Resurrection above the challenges of the world in which we live? Yes.

He will raise us up. He *has* raised us up. He sent Jesus to take the sins that cause so many problems in the world. Paul said to the Romans: “We know that all of creation is groaning with birth pains right up to the present time” (Romans 8:22, EHV). Creation groans with the Coronavirus right now.

Spafford wrote in the second verse of his hymn in our hymnal: “My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought—My sin, not in part, but the whole, Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more: Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!”

Though creation groans right now, Jesus has taken away the underlying symptom of the groaning—sin. *Your* sin, not in part, but the whole, has been nailed to the cross with Jesus. He has paid the penalty.

“After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, so that we may live in his presence” (Hosea 6:2, EHV). He has paid the penalty “so that we may live in his presence.” Though *now* we have to wait, the time is coming when we will live in his presence. Praise the Lord, O my soul!”

IV.

Hosea writes: “Let us acknowledge the LORD. Let us pursue knowledge of the LORD. As surely as the sun rises, the LORD will appear. He will come to us like a heavy rain, like the spring rain that waters the earth” (Hosea 6:3, EHV).

The Lord will appear. While we are waiting, while we are self-quarantining, while we are social-distancing, pursue knowledge of the Lord. Where you have lapsed, now is the time to renew your pursuit of knowledge of the Lord.

If you have been stumbling, or if in the past you have social distanced from the Lord, now is the time to get closer to him. Now is the time to lean on the Lord for strength.

“Let us acknowledge the Lord.” Be the light of the world. Show the strength you have in Jesus and the sure hope you have of the world to come. It is true, you cannot gather together in the sanctuary to lift up your voices to the Lord in prayer or praise. So do so around the television screen or computer monitor as you watch this livestream. Sing out the words of the liturgy and the hymns.

And when the livestream comes to an end, be the light of the world. Be the salt and light Jesus declared his followers to be. Share his love in your social media posts. When you have opportunity, strengthen those loved ones around you with the sure hope you have.

Someday will come a glorious opportunity. Spafford’s last verse says: “And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll; The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend; Even so, it is well with my soul.”

It is well with my soul. No matter what happens in this life—whether sorrow or pain or sickness or death, or maybe even someday when prosperity—God grant us all the Peace Like a River that Spafford could enjoy in adversity. Peace which put words with notes on a page to remind us that God is in control. That God is with us all. That God is with us always. Amen.