

Introduction

I read about an elder approached his pastor and said: **"I've got good news and bad news."** **"What the good news?"** the pastor asked. **"The Elder Board accepted your job description just the way you wrote it,"** he answered. **"So what's the bad news?"** the pastor queried. **"The Board's now looking for someone who can actually fill it,"** he replied. That's the way life is for us all isn't it? It's a mixed bag of good news and bad news. Well, there's a word in our text, Psalm 73:23, that reveals how we should respond to both. It **"nevertheless"** and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Deflated

Asaph, a minister of music for the tabernacle during the reign of King David, wrote twelve of the Psalms, including this one. He recounts in it a crisis that, according to verse 2, almost defeated him. Notice how he describes its effect on him in verse 21. His heart was **"embittered."** He was **"pierced within."** He was deflated in other words.

And so are countless people today. A young woman named Tammy Luke wrote a blog about her father's colon cancer recurring. She described receiving the news in these terms, **"It knocked the wind out of my sails."** Her idiom conveys the same idea that the word **"deflated"** does. People are laid low mentally, emotionally, and/or spiritually. They're disheartened and sad.

A Brazilian student at USC told a local pastor that one thing about Americans surprised him more than any other. It's their lack of laughter. Americans are people who don't laugh, he said, and he's generally right. Long faces and cheerless hearts are everywhere, including the church. As Chuck Swindoll concludes, **"Joy, the 'gigantic secret of the Christian,' is conspicuous by its absence."**

In the end, what Asaph writes here is a psalm for our day. Contemporary people are deflated. Their spirits are laid low.

What is Decisive

But why are they?

Notice Asaph's circumstances in verse 14. He writes that he is **"stricken all day long, and chastened every morning."** In one *Ziggy* cartoon, Ziggy is driving on the highway and passes a sign that says, **"Harsh realities the rest of the trip."** That's what Asaph faces here in verse 14, harsh realities. When my wife's surgeon revealed the result of her colonoscopy, he prefaced it with, **"I'm afraid I have some bad news."** That's to what Asaph is referring in verse 14. It's the harsh realities, the bad news, he's faces. And that, most think, is what deflates people. It's the harsh realities, the bad news, they face.

That's what most think and they're wrong.

Notice the startling contrast in Asaph's posture from the beginning of Psalm 73 to its end. As I noted, he begins **"embittered"** and **"pierced within."** But he ends on the high note of gladness and joy in verse 28. What made the difference? It's wasn't a change in his circumstances because they stayed the same. It was, as verses 23-28 reveal, a change in his frame of mind instead. A new frame of mind inflated his spirit. It made the disheartened and sad man of verses 1-22 the heartened and glad man of verses 23-28.

In his commentary on Psalm 73, Derek Kidner explains what that teaches: **"For the psalm will show the relative unimportance of circumstances in comparison with attitudes, which may be either soured by self-interest (3, 13) or set free by love (25)."** More simply put, it's thoughts not circumstances that are the most decisive. Thoughts, more than anything else, are what make us disheartened and sad on the one hand or heartened and glad on the other.

A Christian couple remains faithful to God and to each other after their 26 year-old daughter dies of lung cancer. A Christian couple resents God and each other and end up divorcing after their 35 year-old son dies of pancreatic cancer. What explains their responses? It wasn't their circumstances, which were pretty much the same. It was their

thoughts, which were noticeably different. I know because I ministered to both couples. They illustrate what Asaph teaches in Psalm 73. It's thoughts, far more than circumstances, that deflate us or inflate us.

Nevertheless

There's a reason for that. It's because thoughts and feelings are inseparable linked. They always go together just as a horse and carriage, love and marriage, or mashed potatoes and cream style corn do.

Cliff Holmes wrote and sang a song titled "Playground in My Mind" that acknowledges the reality of that. Hear its first stanza: **"When this old world gets me down and there's no love to be found. I close my eyes and soon I find I'm in a playground in my mind where the children laugh and the children play and we sing a song all day."** Circumstances get Holmes down. The playground in his mind lifts him up. Circumstances deflate his spirit. The playground in his mind inflates it.

Holmes' song implies that our feelings don't just happen. They're caused. They're fostered and sustained by our thoughts. Thoughts always give rise to and nurture destructive or constructive feelings. His song also implies that our mind is the place of our widest and most basic freedom. We can place it on whatever we choose to place it. We can bring before it whatever we choose to bring before it and keep it there.

Those two truths, together, give us a victory producing strategy or approach for living life. It's the one that Asaph himself used and that he expressed in a word in our text. That word is found in verse 23, **"nevertheless."** Examine the verses that precede it, 1-22. Asaph is deflated. Examine the verses that follow it, 23-28. Asaph is inflated. That makes clear what **"nevertheless"** is. It's a thundering, conquering, life-transforming word. What it did for Asaph, it will do for us – inflate us. It will lift and enliven our spirits.

In the 1988 Olympics, Greg Louganis was the overwhelming favorite to win the gold medal in platform diving. But as he stepped out on to the platform for his final dive, he was in second place behind a young Korean

half his age. He'd need to make a perfect dive to win, which he calmly made. At a press conference afterwards, a reporter asked him how he managed to be so obviously relaxed in doing so. To which he replied: **"It's because of what I thought as I stood on the platform. I may not make this dive. Nevertheless, my mother will still love me."**

Louganis there used Asaph's "'nevertheless' approach" to life and so should we, routinely. This approach requires doing two things.

Realistic about Bad News

First, be realistic about bad news.

Study verses 1-20 and the blanket statements Asaph makes about the wicked and the righteous. He comments in verse 5, for instance, that the wicked have **"no pains in their death"** and in verse 12 that they are **"always at ease."** Or he comments in verse 12 that the righteous are **"chastened every morning."** Those are clearly exaggerated statements.

All of us can empathize with him because we've been there and done that. The fact is that our first inclination as hurting people is to exaggerate the tragic element of the circumstance before us. We usually blow it out of proportion. We perceive it to be worse than it really is. We overestimate its importance and the importance of its impact on us.

The famed Boston minister, Phillips Brooks, told about a prominent businessman who came to his office one day. He was almost hysterical and blurted out, **"Dr. Brooks, did you read the morning paper? I'm ruined!"** Brooks calmed him down and then said: **"Now just a moment, I don't read that paper because I don't subscribe to it. Half the people in town don't read it. Most of the half that do only read the front page and the funnies. Of those who read more than that, I dare say less than one percent will run across your name. And those who don't know you won't be interested in it and won't remember what they read. Those who know you won't believe it. So, relax. You're far from ruined."**

That businessman demonstrates how we usually do react to bad

news. We're unrealistic about it. Our first inclination is to exaggerate how detrimental it is to others or us, which in turn deflates us.

Brooks, on the other hand, demonstrates how we should react to bad news. Be realistic about it. Let's not exaggerate the enormity of harsh realities under stress. Let's keep them in perspective instead. Let's carefully and objectively assess their nature and the nature of their impact on us. We'll find if we do that our bad news is rarely as bad as we initially think it is. That's the truth and we need to grasp it and live it out. Let's be realistic about the bad news. That's the first thing that the **"'nevertheless' approach"** to life requires.

Accentuate the Good News

Once we've done that, we're able to do the second thing it requires. Accentuate the good news. I read a little joke that goes like this: **"What a pessimist. It's a well-informed optimist."** Actually, just the opposite is true. What is an optimist? It's a well-informed pessimist. Optimism, you see, is rooted in reality. The fact is that the good news always outweighs the bad news in our lives, if we're disciples of Jesus.

Much of this good news consists of the visible material realities of our world and life. I think of realities like the U.S. Constitution, taste buds, central heating, bankruptcy laws, laparoscopy, supermarkets, pharmaceuticals, eyeglasses, family, and indoor plumbing to name a few.

But the good news also consists of the invisible spiritual realities of our world and life. As verses 23-28 reveal, these are the realities of God and His kingdom. God protects and provides from the space immediately around us. As our physical bodies age and decline, our spiritual substance grows richer and deeper. If God is for us, who can be against us. God works all things out for our good. When Christian loved ones die, everything will return, and so on.

Now, whatever the nature of the good news is, accentuating it begins with identifying it. We identify it by doing what Jesus says in Matthew 6:26, 28. We **"consider."** The Greek word translated that

means to give deeper thought to things. We examine and analyze their nature and the nature of their impact on us. We recognize the good news in our lives when we do.

Once we've identified the good news, we then exercise the freedom of our mind and dwell upon it. We bring it before our mind and keep it there as needed. We think about it as the circumstances and our own personality require us to do. Doing so creates constructive feelings that in turn inflate us. They hearten us and make us glad.

Suppose I'm diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given two months to live. That's the bad news, which I acknowledge. But I accentuate the good news. I *identify it*. God will sustain me through this final illness. I can die in a holy fashion that glorifies God and increases the faith of others. I can trust the existence of my wife to God. For me, to die is gain. Having identified that good news, I then choose to *dwell on it*.

You get the idea. We accentuate the good news by identifying and dwelling upon it. My spouse dies. *Nevertheless*, everything will return. I'm aging and my earthly body is fading. *Nevertheless*, my resurrection body is approaching. My supervisor gives me an unfair performance evaluation. *Nevertheless*, if God is for me, who can be against me? My business goes bankrupt. *Nevertheless*, I live in America and can start over again. It's bitterly cold. *Nevertheless*, I have central heating in my home. My spouse leaves me. *Nevertheless*, every ending is a new beginning. My house burns down. *Nevertheless*, I am insured.

Conclusion

That then is the "**'nevertheless' approach**" to life. We're realistic about the bad news and accentuate the good news. Back in 1945 Johnny Mercer wrote and sang a song the lyrics of which capture the spirit of Psalm 73: "**You've got to accentuate the positive. Eliminate the negative.**" That's sound advice. So the next time life deflates you and gets you down, do what Asaph did. Roll out the heavy artillery, the big gun, the secret weapon, "**nevertheless.**" You'll be inflated if you do.