

PREACHING THROUGH THE HYMNS:

It Is Well With My Soul

Psalms 146

Words: Horatio Gates Spafford (1828-1888) in 1873

Composed: Phillip Paul Bliss (1838-1876) in 1873

Horatio Gates Spafford

Horatio G. Spafford was born in North Troy, New York on October 20, 1828. A Presbyterian layman, he settled in Chicago and established a successful legal practice. Along with his financial success, he always maintained a keen interest in Christian activities. He enjoyed a close and active relationship with D.L. Moody and other evangelical leaders of that era. He was described as a “noted gospel musician and as a man of unusual intelligence and refinement, deeply spiritual and a devoted student of the Scriptures.”

Some months prior to the Chicago Fire of 1871, Spafford had invested heavily in real estate on the shore of Lake Michigan, and his holdings were wiped out by this disaster. Desiring a rest for his wife and four daughters as well as wishing to assist Moody in one of his campaigns in Great Britain, Spafford planned a European trip for his family in November of 1873. Due to unexpected last minute business developments, he had to remain in Chicago, but he sent his wife H.G. Spafford and their four daughters Anna, Maggie, Bessie, and Tanetta on as scheduled on the S.S. Ville du Havre. A last minute change in cabin assignments moved them toward the bow of the vessel. He told them “goodbye,” and promised to meet them in France in a few weeks.

The French liner, S.S. Ville du Havre, was the most luxurious ship afloat when it sailed from New York. At two o'clock on November 22, the ship was rammed by the English iron sailing vessel, “Lochearn.” It began to sink within twelve minutes and was on the bottom of the ocean within two hours along with 226 lives, including the four Stafford children. Nine days later, the survivors finally landed at Cardiff, Wales, and Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband, “saved alone.” When he received her message, he said to a dear friend, “I am glad to trust the Lord when it will cost me something.” For him it was a second time of testing, coming almost too soon upon the heels of the first. In the Chicago Fire he had lost everything he owned; in the tragedy at sea he had lost his four children. Shortly afterward, Spafford left by ship to join his bereaved wife. On the way over, the Captain called him into his cabin and said, “I believe we are now passing over the place where the “Ville du Havre” went down.” That night he found it hard to sleep. But faith soon conquered doubt, and there in the mid-Atlantic, out of his heart break and pain, Mr. Spafford penned this text, whose words so significantly describe his own personal grief, “When sorrows like sea billows roll...” It is noteworthy, however, that Spafford’s hymn does not dwell on the theme of life’s sorrows and trials, but focuses attention in the third stanza on the redemptive work of Christ and in the fourth stanza anticipates His glorious

Second Coming. When Mr. and Mrs. Spafford reunited in Wales, Mrs. Spafford said, "I have not lost my children. We are only separated for a little time."

The Spafford's close friend, Evangelist Dwight L. Moody, joined them and later noted that, though they were experiencing deep sorrow, the Spafford's never lost their abiding faith in God. They attested to this with their affirmation to Moody, "It is well. The will of God be done." Humanly speaking, it is amazing that one could experience such personal tragedies and sorrows as Horatio Spafford had and still be able to say with such convincing clarity, "It is well with my soul."

In 1881, the Spafford's fulfilled a life-long interest in the Holy Land. They left Chicago with their two young daughters and a group of friends and settled in Jerusalem. There they established the American Colony, which cared for the sick and destitute. Although Horatio died just eight years later at the age of sixty, this significant ministry continued. The story of this special family and their ministry is told in the book, *Our Jerusalem*, written by the Spafford's daughter, Bertha Spafford Vesper.

Phillip Bliss

Spafford's friend, Philip Paul Bliss, composed the music, "Ville de Havre", to this hymn in 1873. It was first published in Bliss' 1876 hymnal "Gospel Hymns No. Two". In most cases, Bliss wrote both the words and music for his hymns. Bliss was a prolific writer of gospel songs throughout his brief lifetime. His songs, like most early gospel hymnody, are strong in emotional appeal with tunes that are easily learned and sung. Other hymns by Phillip P. Bliss include: "Hold the Fort," "I Gave My Life for Thee," "Jesus Loves Even Me," "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning," and "Once for All."

On the last Friday in November, 1876, in a meeting in Farwell Hall, Chicago, where more than a thousand ministers were gathered, Bliss introduced "It Is Well With My Soul" as a solo. A month later, when the ink on the manuscript paper was hardly dry, Mr. and Mrs. Bliss, leaving their two children with his mother, took a train from Buffalo, N.Y. enroute to Chicago, where a new series of services was scheduled to begin shortly after New Year's Day. They left Buffalo on Friday afternoon, December 29, 1876. At eight o'clock that night, while approaching Ashtabula, Ohio, a bridge crossing a ravine gave way and the train and its seven cars of passengers lunged into the icy river below. Fire broke out almost immediately, killing many who had escaped drowning, but were imprisoned by falling beams and twisted timbers. Of the 160 passengers, just fifty-nine bodies were eventually accounted for; there were only fourteen survivors. One of them reported that Bliss could have escaped, but, as his wife was hopelessly caught in the wreckage, he remained at her side, and together they met the onrushing flames and certain death. For three days, his friends remained at the scene of the disaster but they found nothing that could be identified with the thirty-eight year old song leader or his wife, although scores of articles were raked from the ashes and gathered from the bottom of the river.

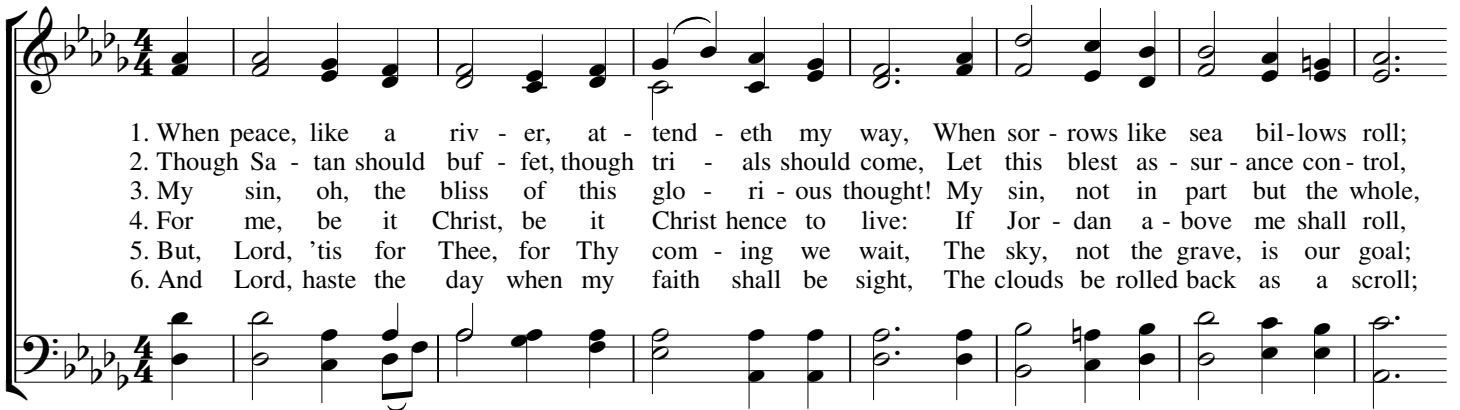
They have no earthly grave, the four Spafford children who drowned in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and Mr. And Mrs. Bliss who perished in the train wreck in Ohio. But their hymn, which followed one tragedy and preceded another, lives forever in the hearts of Christian people, who rejoice that both the Spaffords and the Blisses could truthfully and triumphantly say, "It is well, it is well with my soul."

HISTORICAL SETTING FOR "It Is Well With My Soul"

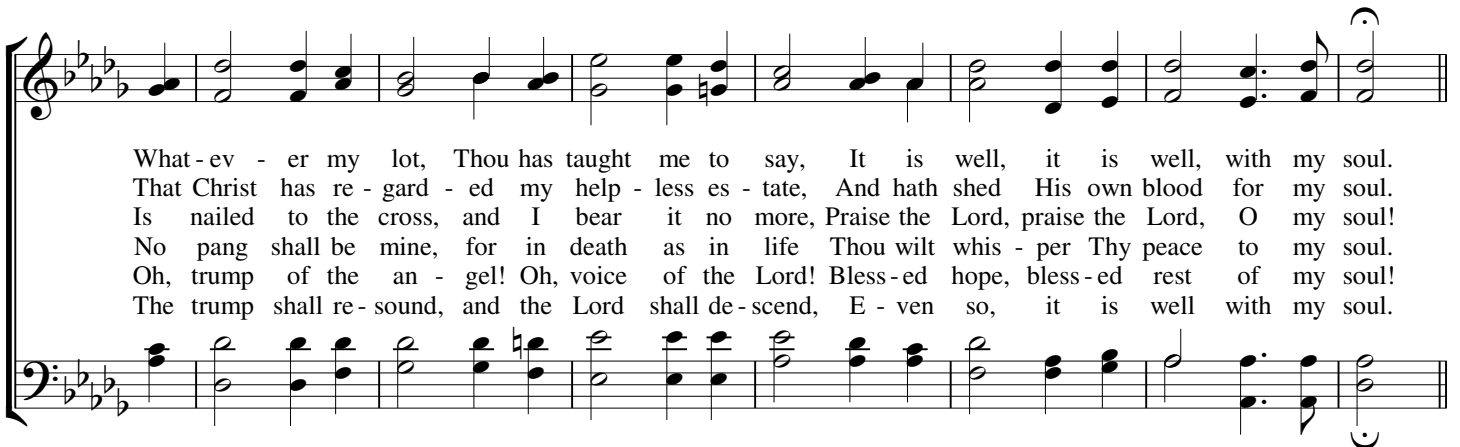
- One cent post cards were placed on sale by the Post office in 1873
- Royal Canadian Police was established in 1873
- John Hopkins University was founded in Baltimore in 1876
- U.S. Marines attacked Panama – 1873
- Susan B. Anthony was fined \$100 for attempting to vote in presidential election.

It Is Well with My Soul

Is it well with thee?... And she answered, It is well. 2 Ki. 4:26
Praise ye the LORD. Praise the LORD, O my soul. Psa. 146:1



1. When peace, like a riv - er, at - tend - eth my way, When sor - rows like sea bil-lows roll;
2. Though Sa - tan should buf - fet, though tri - als should come, Let this blest as - sur - ance con - trol,
3. My sin, oh, the bliss of this glo - ri - ous thought! My sin, not in part but the whole,
4. For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live: If Jor - dan a - bove me shall roll,
5. But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy com - ing we wait, The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
6. And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;



What - ev - er my lot, Thou has taught me to say, It is well, it is well, with my soul.
That Christ has re - gard - ed my help - less es - tate, And hath shed His own blood for my soul.
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life Thou wilt whis - per Thy peace to my soul.
Oh, trump of the an - gel! Oh, voice of the Lord! Bless-ed hope, bless-ed rest of my soul!
The trump shall re - sound, and the Lord shall de - scend, E - ven so, it is well with my soul.

Refrain



It is well, _____ with my soul, _____ It is well, it is well, with my soul.
It is well, _____ with my soul,

Words: Horatio G. Spafford, 1873. Music: "Ville Du Havre"; Philip P. Bliss, 1876. Public Domain.