

“It is Well With My Soul” a sermon by Ray Trygstad

At Center Valley United Methodist Church, Chatsworth, Georgia, October 19th, 2014.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Since I'm here from the Chicago area, I am going to tell you a story of Chicago. This is a tale of a Chicago businessman named Horatio Spafford. Horatio had a successful law practice, had invested wisely in downtown Chicago real estate, and was a leader in his church. He was a friend of Dwight Moody (the founder of Moody Bible Institute), and a man who truly lived his faith. In the wake of the great Chicago fire in 1871, despite the loss of great deal of his own investments and the recent death of their son, Spafford and his Norwegian-born wife, Anna, dedicated themselves to helping those who had been impoverished by the devastation of their city. After years of laboring in the Lord's vineyards, they were exhausted and decided to join Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey in one of their crusades in Great Britain and to take a well-earned vacation in Europe.

The Spaffords and their four daughters booked passage on the steamship Ville de Havre sailing from New York. Spafford was delayed in Chicago by business, but told his wife and daughters to go ahead and planned to join them later. For some reason that he was unable to explain, at the last moment he changed their stateroom from amidships to near the bow of the vessel. Anna and the girls sailed, and halfway to Europe an English sailing ship collided with their ship amidships. Had they been in their original stateroom, all would have been killed. As it was, Anna and the four little girls were cast into the inky black sea. She frantically tried to save them but although she briefly grasped the hem of the nightgown of one of them they all slipped away. Anna was found floating unconscious on a piece of wreckage and was rescued. The ship had sunk in minutes and of the hundreds aboard, only forty-seven were rescued.

Back in Chicago, Spafford received a heart-rending telegram of only two words: “Saved Alone”. He immediately sailed for Europe. As he was enroute, the captain of the ship he was sailing on called him to the bridge. Pointing to the chart, the captain told him that they were just passing the spot where the Ville de Havre had gone down. As Horatio walked the deck in his sorrow, his faith was all that sustained him. It nearly moves me to tears each time I contemplate the depth of his loss. But he was overtaken by a feeling of peacefulness as he realized that he would see his daughters again in heaven. As he watched the waves rolling on the ocean he recalled the words of Isaiah 66:12, “For thus says the Lord, I will extend peace to her like a river...” and penned the words that have come down to us as one of our most enduring hymns:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows, like sea-billows, roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,

Chorus

It is well, it is well with my soul!
It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul!

My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to His Cross, and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!



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How many of us could deal with our grief as Spafford did? He clearly expressed the confidence of his salvation, and the peace and solace that this assurance gave him. He had the ability to say that whatever his lot, it was well with his soul. While I know that the Lord can offer us such an assurance, I also know that despite my faith, I don't know that I would be able to have such peace in my heart in the face of such tragedy.

Sure, I know I should. But faith is a difficult thing, it's a gut-level matter for each of us between you and God. In our Old Testament lesson today, Moses has the opportunity to talk directly with God. God puts him in the cleft of the rock and covers Moses with His hand as He passes by, but Moses gets to see the Lord's back. We are asked to believe without such proof, a belief that is only possible because of a measure of grace that God grants each of us, for we are called to believe without hearing His voice or seeing His passage. Fortunately the core of our faith, the strength, the very essence, is the same for each of us as that which Horatio Spafford felt. This power to believe is drawn directly from God, if only we will surrender to His will in our lives and allow His hand to touch us and fill us with the same faith that calmed the raging seas of sorrow in Spafford's heart. He is there to sustain us when it seems like the pain is too much to bear. His love for us is such that we are called the Children of God; He cares for us just as a parent cares for a child. You always want to shield your children from pain and sorrow, but when that's not possible you want to be there to comfort them and “restore their soul”.

God grants this faith to each of us, if only we will take it and use it. Horatio Spafford did. There's much, much more to his story. As Saint Paul said of the Thessalonians in our New Testament lesson today, “And you became *imitators of us and of the Lord*, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers...” After their return to Chicago and the birth of two more daughters, the events of the preceding years led Anna and Horatio to reexamine the course of their lives. They decided to move their family to Jerusalem to get closer to Jesus, to be—as the Thessalonians were—*imitators* of Jesus and the Apostles. So along with several other families who accompanied them from Chicago, they moved into a house in the Old Quarter, between Herod's Gate and the Damascus Gate, and dedicated themselves to a life of helping the poor of Jerusalem. This settlement became known as “the American Colony” and grew over the years. Several excellent books chronicle the growth and faith of the Colony, including “Our Jerusalem” by their daughter Bertha, and the Nobel Prize-winning historical novel “Jerusalem” by Swedish author Selma Lagerlof, which chronicled the lives of a group of her countrymen that joined the Spaffords and the American Colony to do the Lord's work. Even today the original house in the Old Quarter of Jerusalem is the Spafford Children's Center, still caring for the poor of Jerusalem, and well into the 20th century was run by Anna Lind, a granddaughter of Horatio and Anna Spafford. The Center still reaches out to people of all faiths, has four trustees that are great-grandchildren of the Spaffords, and has a staff that includes Christians, Muslims, and Jews—all working together to extend to Lord's compassion to the poor.

Horatio Spafford's faith moved him not only to praise but to action. Ours should to. Our actions may be as simple as a child's quarter in the offering plate, or, just as the Spafford's efforts invited others to join them in the Lord's work, we can invite the new neighbor down the street to come join us in worship. (Did you know that the number one reason people try a new church is because someone invited them?) Just as the American Colony in Jerusalem helped the poor of that city, the United Methodist Church as a body does a



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great deal to help both those who are poor in earthly goods and those who are poor in spirit we all can help. The measure of faith that God grants to each of us not only sustains us in our times of trial but moves us to action to do the work of His kingdom on earth. It is my prayer today that each of us can feel the faith that God grants to us in full measure, the faith that truly can allows us to say “it is well with my soul”, the faith that allows us to echo the words of Horatio Spafford:

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!
It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul!

Let’s join together in singing Hymn 377, “It is Well With My Soul”. As you sing it, contemplate the faith God granted the man who could view his sorrow and loss and still say “it is well with my soul”, and remember that God grants that same faith to each of us if only we will allow it to fill our lives. Amen.

