

14 September 2018

### **“It Is Well with My Soul”**

I have heard the hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul,” (*UM Hymnal*, # 377) many times in my ministry, but I never knew the moving story behind the song until recently.

When the great Chicago fire struck in 1871, Horatio Spafford, an attorney heavily invested in real estate, lost a fortune. About the same time his only son, age four, died of scarlet fever. Spafford drowned his grief in work, pouring himself into rebuilding the city and assisting the 100,000 who had been left homeless.

In 1873 he decided to take his wife and four daughters to Europe. When an urgent matter detained him in New York, he sent his wife, Anna, and four daughters on ahead. He saw them settled into a cabin aboard the luxurious French liner, *Ville du Havre* (the name of the hymn tune), and promised to see them soon.

During the dark hours of 22 November 1873, as the *Ville du Havre* glided over smooth seas, the passengers were jolted from their bunks. The ship had collided with an iron sailing vessel, and water poured into the ship and the *Ville du Havre* tilted perilously. Passengers clung to posts, tumbled through darkness, and were swept away in power currents of icy ocean. Within two hours, the mighty ship vanished beneath the waters.

The 226 fatalities included the four Spafford girls—Maggie, Tanneta, Annie, and Bessie. Mrs. Spafford was found nearly unconscious, clinging to a piece of the wreckage. When the 47 survivors landed in Cardiff Wales, she cabled her husband: “Saved Alone.”

Horatio immediately booked passage to join his wife. En route, on a cold December night, the captain called him aside and said, “I believe we are now passing over the place where the *Ville du Havre* went down.” Spafford went to his cabin but found it impossible to sleep. He said to himself, “It is well; the will of God be done.” He later wrote his well-known hymn based on those words.

**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.’ 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.**

Thank goodness, not many will know the depth of sorrow experienced by Horatio Spafford. It is difficult to imagine the pain that comes with the loss of a child, much less the loss of five children. But, we all have losses to bear in life. Many of those losses are painful beyond description at the moment they occur.

Where do we turn and how can we come to terms with a terrible loss and still keep sanity and soul unbroken? There is a sense in which each person must find her or his own way through the darkness. Obvious prescriptions from those who have not been there are not usually helpful. But to know someone has been there and managed to keep soul and sanity intact is helpful and hopeful.

So, where are we on the way to being able to say: "It is well with my soul?"

Perhaps we need never have to find out.

**Come, Worship**  
**Stay, Learn**  
**Go, Serve**