

THEN SINGS MY SOUL 9 **"IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL"**

Many of the truths we have been discussing in this series have been born to us through the writings of people who have recorded their reflections of faith in the midst of tragic circumstances. None could be more personally tragic than the story behind today's song: "It is well with my Soul."

Horatio Gates Spafford was a successful lawyer, businessman, and real estate mogul, who lived in Chicago in the 1800's. Spafford and his wife Anna, were the parents of 5 children, a son and 4 daughters. As well, they were sincerely dedicated Christian's, personal friends of D.L. Moody, maybe the greatest evangelist this world knew until Billy Graham was born.

The Spafford's idyllic life was soon to change. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 destroyed nearly all of Horatio's properties located in downtown Chicago and all along Lake Michigan. Undaunted, the Spafford's spent the next 2 years helping the families of the 300 victims, and the 100,000 homeless, to rebuild their lives. About this time their young son contracted Scarlet Fever and died. Aware that these stressful and grief filled years were taking a toll on Anna's own health, Horatio made a decision that the family would vacation in England, to be ministered to by their friend D.L. Moody while he conducted his world famous London Revival.

At the harbor in New York, Horatio received an emergency word that a business venture required his immediate attention. He sent his wife and 4 daughters on ahead with the promise he would follow them in a few short days. Late one evening on an otherwise placid sea, the ship carrying Anna Spafford and her 4 daughters was rammed by another vessel, and sank within 20 minutes!

All but 47 of the 300 passengers were drowned that fateful night. Anna was rescued unconscious floating on a board, but all 4 of their daughters perished in the cold Atlantic Ocean. Horatio heard of the wreck, and waited word, which soon came in the now famous 2-word telegram from Anna to Horatio: "Saved, alone"

Horatio left immediately to grieve with his wife, but while passing the days at sea, he asked the captain of his ship to point out the spot where his girls had drowned. On deck one night they passed near the place, and legend has it that at that moment Horatio Gates Spafford wrote the now famous words:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well; it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

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!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh trump of the angel! Oh voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of 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.

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

There was an old Shunamite woman that lived during the time of Elisha the prophet. Her story is recorded in 2 Kings 4. Elisha often traveled through her village, and often ate and spent nights in the home of this woman and her husband. So taken were they with Elisha the prophet that they actually added a room onto their house for him to sleep whenever his travels brought him their way. So taken was Elisha with this woman, he vowed to give to her childless womb a son. A year later she and her husband were the proud parents of a young boy.

The boy grew into a young man, till one day while working alongside his father he was overcome with a headache. He was carried to the house and later died in the arms of his loving mother. She graciously laid his body, in the bed of the Prophet, and immediately called her servants to prepare a donkey to take her to find her friend, the Prophet of God. As Elisha saw this woman approach, he sent his servant with this instruction:

Please run now to meet her and say to her, 'Is it well with you? Is it well with your husband? Is it well with the child?'" And she answered, "It is well."

How could it possibly be “well”? She is old. Her husband is old. Her son is dead! The miracle that God had given her had been tragically taken away. Her life-long childless scourge once removed had now returned, with a grief-filled vengeance! There was no way it could be “well”!

Elisha joined her as they return to the house; he enters his room alone and finds the boy's body in his bed. He prays to the same God who gave the child in the first place. Elisha then lies down on the young man's body; nose to nose, mouth to mouth, eye to eye, hand to hand. As he stretched out on him, the child's body began to grow warm again, he sneezed 7 times, and opened his eyes!

We dare not dismiss the reality of this story because it happened in the Bible. Who of us at the death-bed side of a loved one, or in the stillness of a mortuary viewing room hasn't wished, even prayed for a similar fate? How could it be well? Maybe we've not lost 4 daughters in a Titanic accident or a son to a fever, and most likely when we've uttered the Shunamite woman's prayer; our child (or loved one) has not been returned to life. How can we sing, "It is well with my soul?"

Jesus knew; his best friend Lazarus died unexpectedly, while Jesus was away on another ministry trip. He was even delayed in returning, but he knew. He knew and he wept at his personal loss of a dear friend. But he knew more, he knew deeper. He assured his frantic disciples that in spite of what it looked like; everything would work out for good, all is well, it is well!

Who can say what it is about life that leads us to such a peace...like a river. Who can say what ingredients it takes, for this person or that, who is able to transform such overwhelming sadness into such unbelievable personal peace? Who can quote the recipe for us to follow in overcoming our own grief's, our own pain, our own sadness, and actually become agents of healing, or lead other souls to a new depth, or a new compassion. Marlene knows the recipe, Joy knows the recipe, Norm knows the ingredients, Jan is living the reality, Bill and Norma are living with the sting; Neal and Deb have been to the depths, and so many others among our family have been, or are now, or one day will stand beside us and sing with deep resonance..."It is well with my soul." I don't understand how, but I am awed by their faith.

Time was when I thought that everything on the outside of my life had to be just so in order for my soul to be o.k. Time was when I thought that I had to do certain things, have certain things or accomplish particular goals in order to gain that wellness of soul.

I believed that other people had to be in a particular state, or that they had to behave in particular ways for my inner landscape to be calm and serene, and if there happened to be turmoil or turbulence in my outer world, I too often allowed that to affect my inner world.

I'm not proud of it, but it's taken me longer than it should have, and I am not there just yet, but I am coming to know for myself that wellness of one's soul is an inside job. And while I may get upset, disappointed, traumatized or hurt by what happens on the outside, I can still know that wellness of soul that passes all understanding.

It is possible to derive intense satisfaction and ego gratification from relationships, activities, substances and things, but in the end, nothing can fill the hole in the soul except God. I've not learned that from reading a book; from hearing (or preaching) a sermon, but from life experiences, mine...and many of your's!

It is possible to experience intense conflict, horrific loss and on-going stress and strain, and it is possible to turn to all different kinds of tranquilizers, stress management techniques and pain relievers, but in the end, nothing can give authentic peace and comfort but the Presence of the Living God, alive and allowed into the deep recesses of the soul. Jesus knew and reminded us...the kingdom of God is within you!

And so it is that I can sing along with that old hymn about the wellness of my soul in the midst of unanswered questions, unresolved conflicts, unsolved problems and imperfect situations. I can rest in that wellness and rest in God even when I don't have what I want and other people aren't doing what I think they ought to be doing. I can even experience that wellness of soul in the darkest night of the soul and in moments of pain and suffering, loss and grief, emptiness loneliness, and even overwork!

It is well with my soul not because of what I do or do not do. It is well with my soul not because of my own efforts, achievements, accomplishments or acquisitions. It is well with my soul, because God inhabits my soul, God lives in my soul, God has restored my soul, God fills my soul, God is my soul...and it is well with my soul!

A father sought to teach his beautiful daughter about this truth, that no matter what happened, it could be well in our souls. He assembled three ingredients, and three pans of water which he brought to a boil. Into the first pot he placed a shiny fresh carrot, into the second he slipped a raw egg, and into the third he placed a hand full of coffee beans. In just 20 minutes or so this discussion ensued.

They noted and discussed how the carrot became weak, lost its color, grew mushy even and was made soft. The egg became hardboiled; its liquid inner had grown hard, and its outer shell even harder. They discussed how some people react to suffering and hardship like the carrot, they lose their will to live, they give up and become weak, soft even. They noted how some people become hard when difficulties come, their liquid insides and fragile exterior become hardened and almost impenetrable at the difficulties of life. These two represent the people who don't handle adversity very well, some becoming soft and giving up, some becoming hard and turning away from God.

Now the coffee beans were the most interesting as they discussed how the coffee beans simply gave themselves to the power of the water and transformed it into a sweet smelling, rich tasting, drink that refreshes all who partake.

That is the result of a well grounded soul who encounters difficulties, tragedies and unfortunate circumstances from a centered life that knows its place and its purpose...to make the world different. You see God is way more interested in making us holy than making us happy, God is way more interested in molding our character than making our lives easy, God is more concerned that we be prepared for eternity, than that we live trivial lives.

I'm not saying God causes all the tragedies to happen in our life; but I am saying that God uses all the tragedies and triumphs in our lives to make us more like His Son... and that gives us peace...in our souls!

Today you can march up a series of steep steps in the city of Jerusalem toward a children's center. Along the path you will likely encounter mothers and fathers with sick, diseased, disabled and distraught children in tow. Each making their way to the children's center where they will be cheerfully greeted by hosts and hostesses, where each child will be helped, and given what they can to address their need, and each will be honored and respected regardless their religion, nationality, skin color or ailment. This center stands on a lot near the wall of the old city, and it has since about 1875, the year Anna and Horatio Spafford decided to invest the rest of their lives into the lives of others, especially children. They decided to change the boiling water of their tragic lives into a wonderful tasty coffee. The center is named after them, and is the result of their commitment to God, their tragic loss of 5 children, and their undying resolution that it is indeed well with their soul!

Out of their extreme grief and sadness Horatio wrote a note to D.L. Moody as they made plans to move to Jerusalem expressing his desire for visiting that holy place. Here is what he said: "Jerusalem is where my Lord lived, suffered, and conquered," Horatio explained, "and I wish there, to learn how to live, to learn how to suffer, and especially to learn how to conquer." You don't have to go to Jerusalem, but you must come to this altar, God's altar, the altar of your soul, the throne-room of your heart. There and there alone will you find what it takes to live, suffer and yes...conquer! It is well with my soul!