

Over the Abyss: It Is Well with My Soul

A Sermon on Great Hymns of Faith

Mark 8:31-38

Sunday, March 8, 2009

by Dr. Frank Trotter

When I was in the 9th grade in Pulaski, Virginia, my father woke me up one Saturday morning and told me that the organist for the funeral he would be conducting in two hours was sick and could not make it. He needed an organist and told me that I was going to play! Even though I had played the piano since the age of 4, I had never sat at an organ console and had no idea what to do. But I went and did my best to get through the service. I recall that a member of the family who knew what had happened came over after the service to thank me for filling in.

I soon added organ lessons to the piano lessons I was taking. Soon I was playing the organ for the Sunday night services and learning to accompany the congregation as it sang the old favorites – “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” “Jesus Calls Us,” “Sweet Hour of Prayer,” and “How Great Thou Art” among others. One of the hymns that I learned to play during that 9th grade year was “It Is Well with My Soul” – which has become one of my top five favorite hymns. This morning I would like to tell you the story behind the hymn.

In the late 1860’s, Horatio and Anna Spafford, a wealthy Chicago family, seemed to have everything they wanted. Then a series of disasters including the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 brought about the loss of much of their real estate wealth. To provide a rest for his wife and four young daughters, Horatio Spafford planned a European trip in November of 1873. However, due to last minute business complications he stayed in Chicago while planning to join them in a few days. Mrs. Spafford and her children booked passage for France on the ocean liner, *Ville du Havre* – considered the “foremost pleasure ship of the seas”¹ in its day. Early in the morning of November 22, 1873, the ocean liner was struck by the *Lochearn*, a great English sailing vessel. In the midst of the panic that broke out, Anna and her children somehow made their way to the deck and were attempting to get into a life boat when they were shoved aside by an anxious crowd. To Anna

¹ Bertha Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem: An American Family in the Holy City, 1881-1949* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1950), 30. Many thanks are extended to Eunice Mathews, wife of Bishop James K. Mathews, for the loan of her copy of this book which is no longer in print.

Spafford's amazement, her daughters were very serene in the face of what could be their death. One said, "Mama, God will take care of us" and another agreed. "Don't be afraid," she said. "The sea is His and He made it."²

Within only twelve minutes, the ship sank and Anna was pulled away from her daughters in the rush of the waters. As she tried desperately to find them in the chaos, she was knocked unconscious by a flailing oar but miraculously floated to the surface where she survived by clinging to a wooden plank.

One of the survivors later reported, "Over the weeping [of the survivors on the rescue ship] was heard the tranquil murmur of the Atlantic, as if nothing had happened to disturb its calm. The sea looked so placid that it was difficult to realize that it had just annihilated one of the largest steamers afloat, and engulfed, as if in play, two hundred and twenty-six lives."³

Anna later said that "when she came back to consciousness in the boat and knew that she had been recalled to life, ...her first realization was complete despair."⁴ She later told her family that she simply did not know how she could survive without her children. "What was life worth now, and what could it ever be without them?"⁵ Days later in trying to understand what had happened, she said what any of us would, "Someday I will understand why."⁶

When the rescue ship finally docked at the port in Cardiff, Wales, Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband to tell him of the tragedy. The message consisted of only two words: "Saved Alone."⁷ Horatio was at the Chicago wedding of a socially prominent family and did not immediately receive her news. When he did, he was inconsolable and asked the same questions as Anna had. Years later, his daughter Bertha wrote, "Until [that moment my father's] life had flowed gently as a river. Spiritual peace and worldly security had sustained his early years, his family life, and his home. Then had come one terrible event after another. The Chicago Fire with its losses, the failure of his real estate venture, and now the loss of all his children, all had come within the space of two years... Added to his grief was spiritual

² Ibid., 33.

³ Ibid., 35.

⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷ Ibid.

conflict... What had [he] done, what had his young wife done, that they should be so afflicted? He felt that eyes [of his comrades and even other Christians] were looking askance at him, wondering. All around him people were asking the unvoiced question, What guilt had brought this sweeping tragedy to Anna and Horatio Spafford?"⁸

Horatio Spafford might have been consumed with that grief or filled with a sense of being abandoned by God. Amazingly, he took refuge in the belief that God is loving and kind despite the travails that may come to us. In order to join his wife as quickly as possible, he booked transit on a ship to Wales. As the ship crossed the Atlantic, the captain called Spafford into his private cabin and said, "A careful reckoning has been made, and I believe we are now passing the place where the *Ville du Havre* was wrecked."⁹ Later he would write his sister, Rachael, "On Thursday last we passed over the spot where she went down, in mid-ocean, the water three miles deep."¹⁰

Since first hearing this story of Horatio Spafford, I have wondered what he must have felt standing in the captain's cabin, knowing that the ship was floating over the abyss where his children had perished. We know that many people who have suffered devastating loss are never able to return to the place where the loss occurred. This week a member of my family lost his executive position in a large corporation. As I've thought of what he must have experienced when the news was broken to him, I've wondered how he will make it through the days ahead knowing that his financial security is suddenly so fragile. Those who report being able to return to the place of loss often say that they were gripped with complete despair as the memory of the loss washed over them again and again. This week I received an e-mail prayer request from a woman in Tennessee I've never met who asked for prayers for her grandson Emile, a 12-year-old boy who is suicidal over the divorce of his parents.

What is it that makes one person persevere and another give up?

One day Jesus begins to teach the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, ...and be killed, and after three days rise again. Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him. But turning and looking at

⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰ Ibid.

his disciples, Jesus rebukes Peter and says, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then he says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Somehow Horatio Spafford found a deep spiritual peace and trust in *this* Lord Jesus Christ as he stood over the abyss. He wrote in his journal, “I do not think of our dear ones there [in the depths of the sea]. They are safe, folded, the dear lambs, and there, before very long, shall we be too. In the meantime, thanks to God, we have an opportunity to serve and praise Him for His love and mercy to us and ours. ‘I will praise Him while I have my being.’ May we each one arise, leave all, and follow Him.”¹¹

Then, near the very spot where his daughters and 222 fellow travelers had perished, he began to write the words that would become the basis of one of the most well-loved hymns of Christian faith¹²:

“When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrow like sea-billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me so say:
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Tho’ Satan should buffet, tho’ trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath 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 His cross and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh, my soul!

And, Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Horatio Spafford, “It Is Well with My Soul,” *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), No. 377.

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.”

Three years later, Philip Bliss, “a prolific writer of gospel songs,”¹³ read Spafford’s words and was deeply moved by their message and the story that accompanied them. Within a few days, he sat down at his piano and composed the familiar tune to which he set Spafford’s text. In choosing the name for his hymn tune, he gave it the name of the ship that went down in the Atlantic – *Ville du Havre*.

[Play Philip Bliss’ tune at the piano.]

A few years ago I was talking with Eunice Mathews about this beloved hymn. Eunice, now 95 years old, is the wife of Bishop James K. Mathews, a college roommate of my father’s, and the only child of Dr. E. Stanley Jones, the most famous Methodist evangelist of the twentieth century. When I mentioned this hymn to Eunice that day, her eyes lighted up and she said, “I’ve got a book that you *must* read!”¹⁴ The book she loaned me (no longer in print) was written by Bertha Spafford Vester, one of Anna and Horatio Spafford’s two children who were born following the tragedy.

As I read Bertha Spafford Vester’s book, *Our Jerusalem*, I came to a passage where she recounted what a great solace the hymn her father had written in his darkest hour had come to mean to her. She said, “Hymns that are the fruit of anguish victoriously overcome are bound to bring blessing. I have sat by the bedside of a woman dying of cancer and, holding her limp and clammy hand, [and] have quietly sung this hymn over and over again... Innumerable letters have told me the same story in different ways, as the hymn affected and helped the despondent and despairing. I turned on the radio once at random and heard a faint voice coming from a remote station telling the story of the writing of the hymn. Another time I was standing in a snowstorm on Riverside Drive, in New York, waiting for the bus, when I

¹³ Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories: The Inspiring True Stories Behind 101 Favorite Hymns* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1982), 128.

¹⁴ Eunice Jones Mathews, “Notes Shared with Frank Trotter,” February 12, 2007. Eunice is the only child of E. Stanley Jones and Mabel Jones.

heard the carillon in the tower of Riverside Church send forth its lovely message in music, 'It is well with my soul.' I stood transfixed with joy and wonder; tears rolled down my cheeks. I let one bus after another pass, and was late for my luncheon engagement, but I could not tear myself away from the spot until the hymn was finished."¹⁵

Somehow the Spafford family turned disaster and heartache into an amazing story of triumph in the midst of adversity, of opening their hearts in the worst of times to experience deep, abiding healing and a reason to persevere.

William James, the father of American psychology, once wrote, "The stream of thought flows on; but most of its segments fall into the bottomless abyss of oblivion. Of some, no memory survives the instant of their passage. Of others, it is confined to a few moments, hours or days. Others, again, leave vestiges which are indestructible, and by means of which they may be recalled as long as life endures."¹⁶

For me, the words of Horatio Spafford have stayed in my heart ever since I first learned to sing them and play Philip Bliss' tune. For me, in the words of William James, they are indestructible vestiges which may be recalled over and over again for as long as life endures.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁵ Vester, 46.

¹⁶ William James (1842-1910), "The Quotations Page," <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/29291.html>.