

It Is Well with My Soul

By Harry Eskew

Horatio G. Spafford was a successful Chicago lawyer and friend of evangelist D. L. Moody and his musical associates, Ira D. Sankey and Philip P. Bliss. In 1873, upon the advice of the family physician and for the benefit of his wife Anna's health, he planned a European trip for his family. Due to unexpected business developments, he remained in Chicago, but sent his wife and four daughters as scheduled on the ship *Ville du Havre* in November 1873. He expected to follow in a few days.

On November 22 the *Ville du Havre* collided with an English ship and twelve minutes later it sank. Mrs. Spafford was saved, but her daughters perished. On December 1 the survivors landed at Cardiff, Wales, and Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband, "Saved alone." Shortly afterward Spafford left by ship to join his wife, and on the high seas, near the scene of the tragedy, he wrote this hymn that expressed his steadfast faith, "It Is Well with My Soul." Gospel hymn composer Phillip P. Bliss set Spafford's text to music and introduced it at Farwell Hall in Chicago.

Anna Spafford later gave birth to three more children, including a son who died of pneumonia at the age of four. Their Presbyterian church regarded the tragedy as divine punishment. The Spaffords responded by forming their own Messianic group.

In 1881 the Spaffords set out for Jerusalem where they established the American Colony. Colony members engaged in charitable work among the people of Jerusalem regardless of religious affiliation, gaining the trust of the local Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities. Through their work in soup kitchens, hospitals, and orphanages, the American Colony ministered to these communities during and after World War I in a time of great suffering.

Horatio Spafford died in 1888 shortly before his 60th birthday and is buried in Mount Zion Cemetery in Jerusalem.

In the late 1990s I was privileged to participate in a tour of Israel with a group from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. We celebrated Thanksgiving with dinner at the exquisite American Colony Hotel. The hotel displays prominently on one its walls the story of this beloved hymn born out of the Spafford's family tragedy.

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."

(Refrain: It is well (it is well),
with my soul (with my soul),
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 has shed His own blood for my soul.
(Refrain)

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, O my soul!
(Refrain)

And Lord, haste the day, when the 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.
(Refrain)