

It Is Well With My Soul

A Message Offered by
Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor
Second Presbyterian Church
Carlisle, PA

One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you..."

While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you."

While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you."

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

Job 1:13-22 (Selected Verses) NRSV

O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it. These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works-- who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

Psalms 104:24-33 NRSV

Then Jesus told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Luke 12:16-23 NRSV

At the age of 43 Horatio Spafford had already learned the hard and hopeful lesson of this parable.



Horatio G. Spafford

Spafford was a senior partner in a thriving law firm in Chicago and a savvy investor in the booming market for real estate along the north shore of Lake Michigan. An ambitious young man, he had accumulated a small fortune and built a beautiful family.



Anna



Tannetta

Maggie

He and his beloved—and much younger—Norwegian-born wife Anna had four delightful daughters. The Spaffords enjoyed entertaining and gained a reputation as gracious and generous hosts.

They were also devout Christians. Horatio was an outstanding Presbyterian elder, a supporter of the abolitionist movement, and a leader in the Christian Temperance Union. The Spaffords even counted among their close friends noted evangelist Dwight Moody, founder of the Moody Bible Institute. In many ways, they appeared to be living the American—and Christian—dream.

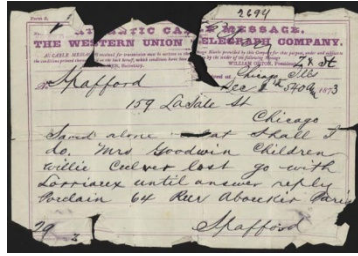
The Spaffords were no strangers to grief, however. A few years earlier, they lost their only son to scarlet fever. And just as they were recovering from *that* loss came one more: the great Chicago fire of 1871. The fire that killed so many people spared the Spaffords' lives but reduced much of their fortune to ashes.

As you can imagine, the death of their son and the devastation of the fire caused them to reassess their priorities. They made a conscious decision to make their relationship with Jesus Christ the central organizing principle in their family life. They sold the remainder of their real estate and with the proceeds poured themselves into helping the many Chicagoans whose lives had been ruined by the fire. They also dreamed of one day moving the family to Jerusalem where they could live and minister in the land of Jesus' birth.

In the months after the fire, Spafford's relationship with Dwight Moody grew stronger. At one of Moody's crusades all four of Spafford's daughters committed their lives to Christ. Soon afterward Horatio and Anna decided to join Moody on a crusade and vacation in England. Just as they were preparing to sail, however, Horatio was detained on business in Chicago; he sent Anna and the girls ahead without him. He intended to join them as soon as he could.

On November 19, 1873, the Spafford women departed New York on the *Ville du Havre*, a French ocean-liner, one of the largest steamships of the day. She was in the icy waters of the North Atlantic when, at just past midnight on November 22, in a heavy fog, their ship was broadsided by an English iron vessel, the *The Lochearn*. The Spafford women's ship sank in just twelve minutes. Two hundred twenty-six drowned in the ensuing chaos, including all four of Spafford daughters: Tanetta, Maggie, Annie, and Bessie.

Exhausted and near death, Anna somehow managed to position herself atop a piece of floating wreckage before falling unconscious. That's where rescuers found her hours later. She was one of only 43 people who survived the tragedy. Nine days after the shipwreck, Anna reached Cardiff, Wales, where she finally was able to telegram her husband with the news. It began: "Saved alone. What shall I do...?"



The Telegram

A devastated Horatio immediately made arrangements to sail to join his wife in Wales. A fifth daughter, Bertha, born a few years after the tragedy, recounts what then happened. While still

In Chicago, Father searched his life for explanation. Until now, it had flowed gently as a river. Spiritual peace and worldly security had sustained his early years, his family life and his home. ... [Now] [a]ll around him people were asking the unvoiced question; "What guilt had brought this sweeping tragedy to Anna and Horatio Spafford?" [But] Father became convinced that God was kind and that he would see his children again in heaven.

On the [fourth day of his] way across the Atlantic, the [ship's] captain called ... Father ... into his private cabin. "A careful reckoning has been made," [the captain] told [him], "and I believe we are now passing the place where the [ship] was wrecked."

[Later,] Father wrote to Aunt Rachel:

On Thursday last we passed over the spot where she went down, in mid-ocean, the water three miles deep. But I do not think of our dear ones there. They are safe, [in God's fold], 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.

He ended that letter with a quote from Psalm 104:33:

"I will praise Him while I have my being."

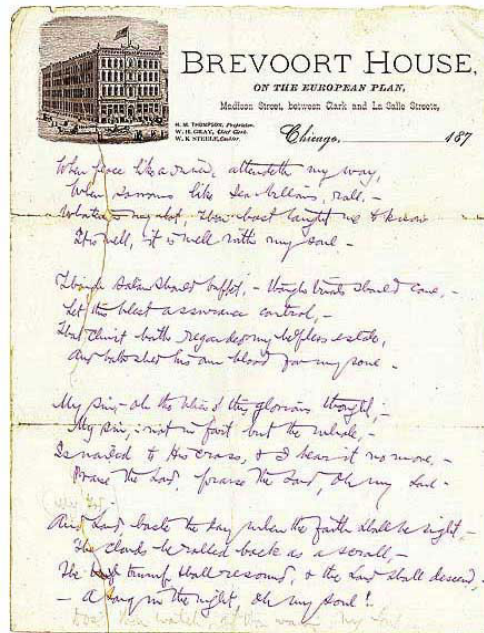
Bertha Spafford Vester, Our Jerusalem

It was on that somber voyage that Spafford is said to have penned the words to the hymn that has expressed the faith of millions:

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

“It is well, it is well with my soul”

“Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know, it is well, it is well with my soul.”



Spafford's Original Handwritten Text of "It Is Well With My Soul"

In the second half of his life, Spafford learned what it was like to be the man in Jesus' parable. He knew that there was more to life than food and clothing. In fact, he knew that there was more to life than life itself. Spafford's reaction to the great tragedies in his life reminds me of another man, Job, who also lost his fortune and family—but not his faith. When tragedy struck, the Bible tells us that

Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

Job 1:20-21 NRSV

The natural reaction to suffering, pain, and loss, is anger, sadness, and grief. And Christians surely experience all of these emotions. But sometimes, in time, by the grace of God, our faith leads us to another emotion or feeling: praise and thanksgiving; it leads us to *worship*. Broken hearts can sing God's praise, too; perhaps they sing it best of all.

- When Job was driven to his knees by loss, he stayed there to praise God for all that God had given him.
- When St. Paul was in prison for his faith he sang joyful songs to God.

- When Horatio Spafford was racked with grief the words that came to his lips were “Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Oh my soul.”

Anyone can praise God in the quiet times; it’s a measure of our character—and our faith—whether we can praise him in the midst of the storm. When a friend asked Spafford how he could keep faith when it seemed that all else was lost, Spafford replied, “I am glad to trust the Lord when it will cost something.”

When it is well with your soul, not even the greatest tragedies can separate us from the love of God—or even our experience of it. When it is well with our souls, we can lose everything and still see that we have lost nothing of eternal importance; that all that is really worth anything endures even drowning, cancer, divorce and death. Some of us have lost a lot in life: jobs, fortunes, reputations, marriages, spouses, and even children. Perhaps you have learned with Job, and St. Paul, and Horatio Spafford what lasts and what does not. And perhaps in your grief you have found yourself still able to sing praise.

How is it with your soul today? To answer that question we have to cut through all the outer measures of “wellness” and “success” to our innermost being—the place of our deep connections to God and to each other.

- Is your soul troubled today?
- Is your soul longing for companionship?
- Is your soul whole and at peace?

At Camp Krislund this past week I spoke each night on the theme of choices: “Decisions that Determine Your Destiny.” For the first time some of the 160 campers and staff began to think not just about tomorrow, but about eternity -- and the condition of their souls. They began to think about what really matters, what lasts, and whom they want to trust with their one and only lives.

And weren’t we all shocked by the news of Michele Schlusser’s death? It is hard to believe that someone so young and full of life could be with us one minute and gone the next. There was no way, of course, that she or her family could be prepared *emotionally ready* for such a death, but Michele was *spiritually prepared*. Even in the midst of her hectic life as a wife, mother, nursing instructor, and church leader (Note: Michele was a Deacon, leader in the Health Ministry, and member of three of our choirs) she made time to continue to work on her relationship with God. You see, Michele had endured much tragedy in life: the sudden death of her father when she was just seven and the equally unexpected loss of her sister when she was an adult. These experiences had impressed upon her the lesson that we don’t always have tomorrow to get our spiritual houses in order. We need to be ready NOW. Over the years she had done enough hard spiritual work, wrestling with God sometimes to be sure, where she could say, at any time, no matter what happens, “It is well with my soul.” That’s the faith that kept her singing God’s praises in this sanctuary week after week.

There are no shortcuts to that kind of faith. Souls are not shaped, healed, or filled overnight. But if all is not well with your soul today, today can mark a new beginning for you. Things *can* change. God *can* put a song of hope and confidence in your heart, especially if you can trust him when answers and explanations are scarce.

The Spaffords eventually lived out the dream that they believed God had place in their hearts years before. They had another daughter, moved to Jerusalem, and established a Christian community there. Dozens of American families and individuals eventually joined them. Locals called them “Spaffordites,” or, more often, “Overcomers.” It was well known that the Spaffords were in Jerusalem *overcoming* their losses and the suffering of this life. But, once again, instead of focusing on themselves and their pain the Spaffords and their followers used their financial resources to support orphanages, soup kitchens, and hospitals for the local people—not to convert them, but to love them. The Spafford Children’s Center still operates in Jerusalem today.

Out of great pain, great love can come. This is, of course, the message of Christ’s life, and, I think, that of Horatio Spafford and his song. May God enable each of us to sing with him, now, and in our darkest hours, “It is well with my soul....” Amen.

IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

Text by Horatio G. Spafford

*When peace, like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll.
What ever 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.
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! (Refrain)
My sin - O the joy 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! (Refrain)
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. (Refrain)*

Dear Friend,

I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a

*complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at
www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons*

Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.

Jeff Gibelius, Pastor

Second Presbyterian Church

528 Garland Dr.

Carlisle, PA 17013

www.GrowWithSecond.org

717-243-4571

© 2010 Jeffrey Gibelius

This sermon is intended for personal use and distribution. If you want to use it for anything else, I'd be honored. Just call for permission. No claims of absolute originality are made for this material. As one man said, "I churn my own butter, but I use milk from other men's cows."