

## **It Is Well with My Soul**

2 Kings 4:26

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

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On this Choir Sunday, when our service centers around praising God in music, our Sanctuary Choir will be singing a choral arrangement of a very familiar hymn, and one that often ranks toward the top of the list of people's favorites: "It Is Well with My Soul." So I decided that I would tell you about the circumstances that led to the writing of that hymn.

That phrase—"It is well with my soul" is loosely taken from a story that is told in the book of 2 Kings, when the prophet Elisha was serving as God's spokesman for the people of Israel. Whenever Elisha was in the town of Shunem, he would stay in the home of a man and his wife who had no children. The woman was deeply distressed that she was unable to bear children. Elisha promised to her that God would give her an heir. And so it did happen that in due time she gave birth to a son. However, when the child was older, he became ill and died. Of course, the mother was greatly grieved over the death of her son.

When word came to Elisha about the boy's death, he rushed to comfort the woman. Elisha sent his messenger ahead to ask her (this is from 2 Kings 4:26):

Is it well with thee? And she answered, It is well.

This hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul", was written in 1873 by a lawyer from Chicago named Horatio Spafford. Mr. Spafford was fairly well known in Chicago for his business endeavors, but also for their benevolent work and support of evangelist D. L. Moody. You might think that it would be easy for a rich, successful Chicago lawyer to write a song titled, "It Is Well with My Soul."

But the Spaffords' life was certainly not easy. In 1870 Spaffords' only son died of scarlet fever at the age of four. A year later came the Great Chicago fire, and Spafford, who was heavily invested in real estate on the shores of Lake Michigan, lost all his holdings in the fire.

Aware of the toll that these disasters had taken on the family, Mr. Spafford decided to take his wife and four daughters on a holiday to England. And, not only did they need the rest, but D. L. Moody needed the help. He was traveling around Britain on one of his great evangelistic campaigns. Horatio and Anna Spafford planned to join Rev. Moody in late 1873. And so, the Spaffords traveled to New York in November, from where they were to catch a steamship across the Atlantic.

Just before they were to set sail, a last-minute business development forced Mr. Spafford to return to Chicago. Not wanting to ruin the family holiday, Spafford persuaded his family to go as planned. He would follow on later. With this decided, Mrs. Spafford and her four daughters sailed east to Europe while Mr. Spafford returned west to Chicago.

On November 2, 1873, their ship collided with another, and it sank in only 12 minutes, claiming the lives of 226 people. All four Spafford children drowned, although Mrs. Spafford survived miraculously. When the survivors of the wreck had been rescued,

Mrs. Spafford's first reaction was one of complete despair. From Wales, she sent a telegram to her husband that read "Saved alone."

Then she heard a voice speak to her, "You were spared for a purpose." And she immediately recalled the words of a friend, "It's easy to be grateful and good when you have so much, but take care that you are not a fair-weather friend to God."

Upon hearing the terrible news, Horatio Spafford boarded the next ship out of New York to join his bereaved wife. As he was en route, the captain of the ship, who was aware of Mr. Spafford's great loss, when they got to the approximate place where the shipwreck had occurred, called Spafford to the bridge and told him that this was where it had happened.

It was then that Mr. Spafford returned to his stateroom and wrote the lyrics of his great hymn.

When you know the story behind the writing of this hymn, a line like "when sorrows like sea billows roll" takes on new meaning.

I think that the reason this hymn is so popular is that it affirms that no matter what circumstances we may experience in our lives we can also say as Horatio Spafford said, "It is well with my soul."

Where did that strength and faith come from? Three things are stated in the hymn. One is in forgiveness of sins—you see this in verse 3.

*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!*

To know that our sins are forgiven brings great comfort, for "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). As the psalmist says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our sins from us."

Second: Another source of strength—you see this in the second verse of the hymn—is the knowledge that in all things God works together for good to them that love him. (Romans 8:28). God's unfailing love enables us to face all circumstances with confidence, without fear.

Finally, there is the sure hope of the resurrection. This is the last verse. The hope of reunion with loved ones, the joy of seeing our Lord face to face supply strength enough and to spare to face all of life's trials and fill us with "joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8).

Even through the trials of life, we too can sing, "It Is Well with My Soul".✠