

It Is Well With My Soul

A beautiful hymn of peace and praise, incredibly, this song was penned from grief borne in the midst of the most tragic of circumstances.

by Cathy Sheridan

Paul Harvey's radio program *The Rest of the Story* gives interesting but little-known details about the lives of famous people, and unusual background information behind well-known events. Hymns also sometimes have interesting and encouraging stories as to how and why they were written.

Their hearts were comforted and strengthened by the truth of the resurrection.

Horatio G. Spafford, a 43-year-old Chicago businessman, suffered financial disaster in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. He and his wife were still grieving over the death of their only son shortly before the fire. Spafford realized they needed to get away for a vacation. Knowing that their friend and well-known evangelist Dwight L. Moody was going to be in England that fall for a campaign, he decided to take the entire family to England. His wife Anna and his four daughters sailed ahead on the *S.S. Ville du Havre*. Urgent business delayed him so he planned to follow shortly.

The ship was struck by an iron sailing vessel and sank in 12 minutes in the cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Two hundred and twenty-six lives were lost. Mrs. Spafford miraculously survived the accident, but their four daughters Tanetta, Maggie, Annie and Bessie drowned in the tragedy. On reaching the European mainland, she cabled her husband with the sad message, "Saved alone."

Stories differ as to when the hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul," was written. Some believe it was later when Spafford was on a ship to rejoin his wife in Cardiff, Wales. When the captain informed him that they were passing over the scene of the accident, what depth of pain-filled grief must have flooded over him. The Holy Spirit inspired him to pen these words, "When sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, it is well, it is well, with my soul."

Others feel Spafford wrote this hymn about two years later when Moody and his music evangelist Ira Sanky were staying at the Spafford home. Friends can be a comfort and encouragement during difficult circumstances. Spafford, in spite of his anguish, could say along with the apostle Paul, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (*Philippians 4:11*).

This bereaved, loving father longed for the day when he would see his four beautiful daughters and son again. "And Lord haste the day when the faith will 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." The hope of being reunited with their beloved children gave these parents the courage to keep on living in faith. Their hearts were comforted and strengthened by the truth of the resurrection.

This hymn is a beautiful expression of worship—"Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, O my soul." Each verse contains wonderful expressions of faith and truth. In spite of the horrible tragedy, the comfort that comes from a strong faith in God shines brightly through the gloom. This hymn echoes of pain and suffering but also of the eternal hope that all believers have.

Our compassionate heavenly Father gives us comfort, hope and peace in His Son Jesus Christ.

Although the words "it is well with my soul" are not found in Scripture, Jesus did say, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened ... and you will find rest for your souls" (*Matthew 11:28-29*). Our compassionate heavenly Father gives us comfort, hope and peace in His Son Jesus Christ.

One day God will wipe away every tear and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. To all parents who have lost a child and to anyone going through the loss of a loved one, may you be comforted and encouraged by this hymn. The Spaffords had two more daughters born after the shipwreck tragedy and then the family moved to Jerusalem. Horatio Spafford died in the faith of malaria in 1888. And now you know the rest of the story!

Cathy Sheridan, based in Alberta, is a pastor's wife who works full time and has a passion and love for worship and women's ministry.

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