

## It Is Well with My Soul - The Story Behind the Hymn

Horatio Gates Spafford was born in New York, on 20th October 1828, but it was in Chicago that he became well-known for his clear Christian testimony. He, and his wife Anna were active in their church, and their home was always open to visitors. They counted the world-famous evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, among their friends. They were blest with five children, and considerable wealth. Horatio was a lawyer, and owned a great deal of property in his home city.

Not unlike Job in the Old Testament of the Bible, tragedy came in great measure to this happy home. When four years old, their son, Horatio Jnr, died suddenly of scarlet fever. Then only a year later, in October 1871, a massive fire swept through downtown Chicago, devastating the city, including many properties owned by Horatio. That day, almost 300 people lost their lives, and around 100,000 were made homeless. Despite their own substantial financial loss, the Spaffords sought to demonstrate the love of Christ, by assisting those who were grief-stricken and in great need.

Two years later, in 1873, Spafford decided his family should take a holiday in England, knowing that his friend, the evangelist D. L. Moody, would be preaching there in the autumn. Horatio was delayed because of business, so he sent his family ahead: his wife and their four remaining children, all daughters, 11-year-old Anna, 9-year-old Margaret Lee, 5-year-old Elizabeth, and 2-year-old Tanetta.

On 22nd November 1873, while crossing the Atlantic on the steamship, Ville du Havre, their vessel was struck by an iron sailing ship. Two hundred and twenty-six people lost their lives, as the Ville du Havre sank within only twelve minutes.

All four of Horatio Spafford's daughters perished, but remarkably Anna Spafford survived the tragedy. Those rescued, including Anna, who was found unconscious, floating on a plank of wood, subsequently arrived in Cardiff, South Wales. Upon arrival there, Anna immediately sent a telegram to her husband, which included the words "Saved alone...."

Receiving Anna's message, he set off at once to be reunited with his wife. One particular day, during the voyage, the captain summoned him to the bridge of the vessel. Pointing to his charts, he explained that they were then passing over the very spot where the Ville du Havre had sunk, and where his daughters had died. It is said that Spafford returned to his cabin and wrote the hymn "It is well with my soul" there and then, the first line of which is, "When peace like a river, attendeth my way.." Obviously, the voyage was one of deep pathos, and is the clear inspiration of the moving and well-loved hymn. Horatio's faith in God never faltered. He later wrote to Anna's half-sister, "On Thursday last, we passed over the spot where she went down, in mid-ocean, the waters three miles deep. But I do not think of our dear ones there. They are safe..... dear lambs".

After Anna was rescued, Pastor Nathaniel Weiss, one of the ministers travelling with the surviving group, remembered hearing Anna say, “God gave me four daughters. Now they have been taken from me. Someday I will understand why.”

Naturally Anna was utterly devastated, but she testified that in her grief and despair, she had been conscious of a soft voice speaking to her, “You were saved for a purpose!” She remembered something a friend had once said, “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.”

Following this deep tragedy, Anna gave birth to three more children, but she and Horatio were not spared even more sadness, as on February 11th, 1880, their only son, Horatio (named after the brother who had died, and also after his father), he also died at the age of four.

In August 1881 the Spaffords left America with a number of other like-minded Christians, and settled in Jerusalem. There they served the needy, helped the poor, and cared for the sick, and took in homeless children. Their desire was to show those living about them, the love of Jesus.

The original manuscript of the Spafford’s hymn has only four verses, but later another verse was added. The music, which was written by Philip Bliss, was named after the ship on which Horatio and Anna’s daughters had died – Ville du Havre.

Horatio Spafford died of malaria on 16th October 1888. Anna Spafford continued to work in the surrounding areas of Jerusalem until her own death in 1923. Both Horatio and Anna were laid to rest in Jerusalem. It can truly be said, in the words that Spafford penned that, “It is well with their souls.”

<https://www.cocdiscipleship.org/middle-ages/horatio-gates-spafford-the-story-behind-the-hymn-it-is-well-with-my-soul/>

#### Activities

1. Why was the family travelling from New York to England?
2. Why did they not all travel together?
3. When Horatio passed the spot where his daughters had perished, he said, “But I do not think of our dear ones there. They are safe..... dear lambs”. What did he mean by this?
4. The words of the chorus of the hymn are: “It is well with my soul”. How do you think Horatio could say this?
5. Anna was told that she had been saved for a purpose. What work for the Lord did she go on to do?