

Austin Stone

WORSHIP

IT IS WELL

BY STEPHEN CRAWFORD

Will your circumstances dictate your worship, or will your worship dictate your circumstances? This is one of the chief struggles of the Christian life and the central theme in the timeless hymn, “It is Well with My Soul.” It turns out the story of the hymn’s composition is almost as rich as the hymn itself.

In October 1871, the Great Chicago Fire brought the city of Chicago to ashes along with the financial state of one prominent lawyer, Horatio Spafford. Desiring a respite for his devastated family, he sent his wife and four young children on a ship for a holiday in Europe, where he would join them later.

His family’s ship would never make it to Europe. While crossing the Atlantic the steam ship was struck by a passing iron vessel and 226 passengers lost their lives, including his eleven-year-old Tanetta, nine-year-old Bessie, five-year-old Margaret Lee, and two-year-old Annie. Only his wife survived, sending him a telegram from England with the simple words, “Saved alone.”

Horatio Spafford took the journey across the Atlantic to meet his wife in England. It was on this journey—over the same waters that drowned and swallowed his four precious children—that he penned the original lyrics to “It is Well with My Soul”:

*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.*

THE SECRET TO CONTENTMENT

How Spafford faced his pain and what his now famous words point us to is that regardless of what we are going through, Jesus teaches us to anchor our souls in something deeper. It is when we hope in the unchanging grace of Christ, His gospel, and the glory that awaits us that we can actually sing and believe it is well with our souls. The Apostle Paul himself shared Spafford’s sentiment:

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11–13 ESV)

Paul and Spafford alike knew there is a secret to facing the whole range of circumstances in life. This song invites us into the secret by taking our eyes off our circumstances to dwell instead on our freedom from sin through the cross.

*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!*

With these lyrics we lift our eyes to the incredible eternal reality that our sin has been removed from us by the cross of Christ. For it was through Christ's work that God "[forgave] us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:13–14 ESV).

The cross now stands as our payment, clearing our eternal debt and reconciling us with God. What a glorious thought!

PEACE WITH GOD

Now how does the forgiveness of sin actually help us in a time of suffering? Though seemingly unrelated on the surface, herein lies precisely where our joy and steadfastness can be found in even the worst trials—God's forgiveness made possible our unity and peace with Him.

Christ's work on the cross absorbed our punishment and removed our condemnation, making God's heart toward us one of a Father toward a child. Thus we can know that whatever trials or pain we experience flow directly from the kind heart of a God who loves us. Therefore we praise the Lord and sing, "*It is well with my soul.*"

A GREAT HOPE

At the song's closing we acknowledge that we do not merely endure these present sufferings knowing that God is for us. We also look forward with eager longing to the day when Jesus returns:

*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.*

There is indeed coming a day when Jesus will return to rule and reign on the earth. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4 ESV). We Christians are a people who live this life with a great hope, and when we sing "It Is Well" we not only remember our hope, we are compelled to live in light of it.