

Psalm 34:19
It is Well with My Soul
July 31st, 2016

Psalm 34:19 reads:

**Many are the afflictions of the righteous;
but the Lord delivers him out of them all.**

The hymns and songs we sing at church they hold and express our hopes and dreams, they give voice to our praise and thanksgiving.

They voice our beliefs. They are our theology. They encourage us and give us strength and comfort in time of trial and sorrow.

I did a survey once of people's favorite hymns and I was impressed by how many of them spoke of the desire for "**Assurance**"; assurance of God's love, assurance of God's presence and assurance of our forever home in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Hymns of assurance, at times we sing them with great faith and hope, at other times we sing them holding desperately to the promises they hold. They meet our needs in times of great joy and great sorrow.

Such a hymn is the one I am going to speak to today. It is based on the knowledge that the righteous suffer. It is also based on the words of the Shunammite woman from 2 Kings 4:26 who when asked by Elisha's servant how she was replied, "**It is well**" even though her heart was breaking over the death of her son.



This hymn was written by a rich Chicago lawyer Horatio Spafford in 1873. You might think, "Yeah, a rich Chicago lawyer can easily say, 'It is well with my soul' for what would he have to worry about?"

But my friends you can own the world and still be unhappy and no life is untouched by sorrow. Job 5:7 says, “Humans are born to trouble as surely as sparks fly up from a fire.”

In 1870 the Spafford’s only son died of Scarlet Fever. The following year Horatio lost most of his fortune in the great Chicago fire because it had been invested in real estate.

Now Horatio and his wife Anna were strong believers in Jesus Christ. They were friends and supporters of the great evangelist D.L. Moody. They were heavily involved in their church and Christian social movements of their day.

Following the fire Horatio poured himself into the rebuilding of Chicago as a way of drowning his grief over the death of his son and helping the 100,000 people who had been left homeless by the fire.

With this in mind let us sing the first verse of this hymn.

VERSE ONE AND CHORUS Hymn 377

Things went from bad to worse for Horatio and his family. In 1873 he decided to go to England to help out D. L Moody and Ira Sankey in their evangelistic crusade followed by a vacation in Europe. So he booked his family, his wife and his four daughters, on the luxurious French liner “Ville du Havre”.

At the last minute he was detained by urgent real estate business; so he sent his family on ahead. He was going to join them shortly, but on the night of November 22, 1873 the “Ville du Havre” struck another ship and sank within 12 minutes.

Of the 313 aboard Mrs. Spafford was one of only 87 passengers and crew to survive.



She remembered having her one daughter torn from her arms as she plunged into the icy waters. Her other daughters drowned when they lost their grip of the man who was trying to save them and were sucked into the vortex of the sinking ship. Anna was only saved because she landed unconscious on top of a piece of floating debris and was there later found alive.

She despaired of life and sought to throw herself into the frigid water, but in that moment she heard God's voice reminding her that "She was saved for a reason. She had work to do." 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." And thus the words of verse one, "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrow like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul."

In an Upper Room devotional there was a story of a woman who found she had a rare type of ovarian cancer. She too despaired of life until God sent into her life other cancer patients, much sicker than she, who witnessed to their faith in God through joyful living.

She wrote, "My treatment is finished, and today I feel wonderfully alive. I prayed for my deepest desire: a sure physical cure. Instead, Christ healed my spirit, replacing doubt and fear with trust and peace."

Now I believe songs such as these take on new meaning and deepen their ability to help heal our souls when we know the stories behind them. These songs of assurance come not from the optimism of youth or the untried faith of problem less lives. They come from the fiery furnace of trial and each word holds promise for our lives now and into the future.

Let us sing verse two and chorus

VERSE 2 AND CHORUS

The Spafford's had now lost all 5 of their children. Horatio Spafford followed his wife to England. She had earlier cabled her husband "Saved alone. What shall I do..." The pathos of that is hard to comprehend.

On the passage over to England, one evening, the captain called Horatio aside and told him, "I believe we are now passing over the place where the "Ville du Havre" went down." Spafford went to his cabin and couldn't sleep. He said to himself, "It is well; the will of God be done." He then wrote the words to this hymn."

Horatio and his wife Anna were faithful Christians, faithful in the sense that they were completely loyal to God. Whatever the test, or trial or sorrow that came into their lives they turned to God, not away from God.

They reminded me of Job. He lost his children, his fortune, his health. He sat in an ash heap scraping his oozing sores with a potshard and his wife told him he ought to just curse God and die! His reply though was "Shall we not indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity? In all this Job did not sin with his lips."

Life is tough, full of trials and troubles. The church is at times tough to belong to, and some of the people and its decisions can drive you wild or deeply disappoint and puzzle you. The United Methodist Church is in such a time and place now.

And if we put our trust in others and not in God we will be disappointed.

The Spaffords put their full trust in God. They knew their salvation and their future reuniting with their children were not based on what they could or could not do and the circumstances of their lives, but in God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

This is spoken of very clearly in verse 3. They knew their sins were nailed to the cross and nothing they could do, could add, or subtract from that gift. They knew their salvation was assured.

Let us sing verse 3

VERSE 3 AND CHORUS *hymn 377*

And our hope is not only in this life. Our hope is also in the world to come. We here hold the hope that one day we will be reunited with all our loved ones who have died in the Lord, who had faith and loyalty to God and lived that out in the good and the bad times.

I pray that this hymn soaks into your hearts and minds and is lived out in your lives. I pray you turn to God in the good times and realize in the bad times, the times of trial and sorrow and sickness that those are the most important times to turn to the Lord and not away.

Yes, we have trials as the hymn “And Are We Yet Alive” says. We have “mighty conflicts past, fightings without and fears within,” but are we not alive to do God’s work here and now? God’s words are the same to you as they were to Anna Spafford, “You have work to do.”

Are we not alive? Is not our salvation assured and our eternal home prepared? Let us live like it is. Let us love one another as if it is!

Let us sing verse 4

VERSE 4 AND CHORUS

Over the years when I have started Huddle groups like the one I started here I always start the first one asking the people to “**Share a time in which God has spoken to you.**” Almost inevitably most share of some terrible experience in their life where in the midst of it or shortly thereafter God’s presence and message has been felt and received by them.

These moments are called “Kairos” moments. They are times in which God breaks into our world with the assurance of his presence, or love or guidance. These are times in which God breaks into our lives with the assurance that this life is not all there is.

Often times people have shared with me how God comforted them through the death of a spouse or child or loved one. People have shared how their faithfulness in deep sorrow has been met by God's faithfulness.

Huddle groups are places where we learn to listen for God and be comforted by God who often speaks without words and comforts us without arms to hug us. We hear about where the sky and a rainbow have brought word that a loved one who passed was ok. We have heard how Jesus came to a person who absolutely despaired of life and then they went on to dedicate all of their life in God's service.

God often speaks in the troubles and disasters of life. I don't know why things have to get so bad for us to listen, why it seems we have to get hit over the head with a 2X4 for us to listen. But I indeed have found a better way.

In our huddle group I teach people how to listen better for the voice of God in the circumstances and relationships of life. I bring people to an awareness of God's unending presence with us. God who is always speaking, loving, caring; it is we who are often so deaf and blind we don't see and hear.

Huddle groups not only help us to listen to God they help us make our lives like Jesus' life. My current crop of huddlers will graduate in about 7 months and then they will take on huddles of their own to pass on what they have learned and experienced. I share this with you today to whet your appetite for what is to come.

But I also share it with you because as we grow to be more like Jesus we grow in our sense of assurance of God's presence, love and eternal providence and we grow in our ability to help others experience God's assurance too.

So simply, most Sundays I ask two questions: What is God saying to you through the Word read, preached and most importantly on a Sunday like this sung? And two: What are you going to do with what

God said? It is in the doing that God's word brings power, peace and assurance into our lives.

In Jesus' Name, Amen!