

The Hymns We Sing
Sermons on the Great Hymns
It Is Well With My Soul

With Study Questions

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It Is Well With My Soul

Philippians 4:10-13

Spafford's Grief

This hymn was written by Horatio Spafford in 1873. Three major traumas in Spafford's life led to the writing of this hymn. First, his son died just prior to the Chicago fire. Second, the great Chicago fire of October 1871 ruined him financially. Finally, desiring to give his family a rest (and participate in an evangelistic crusade in Great Britain) he planned a trip to Europe. Due to some unexpected, last minute business developments he was detained in Chicago, but sent his wife and four daughters ahead as scheduled. Shortly after, while crossing the Atlantic, all four of Spafford's daughters, Bessie, Annie, Maggie, and Tanetta died in a collision with another ship.

Spafford's wife Anna survived and sent him what came to be a famous telegram that simply read, "Saved alone." Several weeks later, as Spafford's own ship passed near the spot where his daughters died, he wrote the words to this hymn. They speak of contentment and eternal hope for all believers, no matter what pain and grief befall them on earth.

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

The Soul

In singing this hymn we are claiming to have peace in our souls – which is really quite a claim. Is this our honest testimony? When sorrow comes, is it truly well with your soul? In order to honestly evaluate this we must have some definition of what the soul actually is. Soul, *psuche*, has various meanings in Scripture: life of the body (Luke 12:22), the immaterial part of man (Matthew 20:28), seat of personality (Luke 9:24), seat of sentience (Matthew 11:29), seat of will or purpose (Matthew 22:37), etc. Based upon the circumstances of the writing of this hymn, the author seems to be pitting the condition of his soul against the condition of his passions or personal grief and sorrow.

Our context for defining the "soul" must then be understood as the immaterial part of man: his mind, his thoughts, his volition, etc. versus the material part of man: his body, his feelings, his glands, and so on. Making a clear distinction between these things is critical yet often ignored, or confused, in many Christian circles. This confusion can cause great turmoil in the life of the Christian. We should never confuse our glands with our souls.

Suffering yet Content

The sea billows represent those conditions in life that bring tears to our eyes and grief to our bowels. Unlike the peaceful river, the sea billows bring a furrow to our brow. It is this type of event Paul writes of when he recalls having been abased, hungry, and suffering need versus full and abounding (Philippians 4:10-13). For Paul the sea billows may have been his being stoned, his many beatings or his own shipwreck (2 Corinthians 11:25). There is no doubting the fact that Paul suffered.

He indicates in Philippians that he had learned contentment in this suffering. So Paul was suffering, yet at the same time, he was content. In order to keep our categories clear let us review briefly. Paul was shipwrecked resulting in his suffering, yet he was content. So what was the contentment Paul experienced? If we may take the liberty to replace "It is well..." with "I am content," what do we mean by well or content? It becomes critical here for us to define what contentment actually means.

Content or Serene?

The word used by Paul, *autarkes*, means having no need of assistance. We, and even Webster's, have come to define "content" as a state of happiness or visceral serenity and tranquility. In other words my contentment is wrapped up in my feeling okay about it all. It is hard to imagine this to be Spafford's condition as his ship sailed by the watery graveyard of his four daughters. It certainly wasn't Paul's disposition for he defined his position as one of suffering. At a material, or existential level, suffering and serenity are mutually exclusive; if I have a feeling of suffering I do not have a feeling of serenity and vice-versa.

Skating through Heartaches

"It is well with my soul," therefore, does not mean I feel all right about things. It is a mistake for Christians to view contentment as not feeling grief or sorrow or pain as a result of life's shipwrecks. It doesn't take long for Christians to learn that being a Christian does not mean life will be easy and absent calamity. But due to poor instruction we seem to be under the impression that the Christian faith does mean that we should be able to skate through heartaches unscathed – whistling zippity-do-dah. This is simply not the case. The tears of Jesus at the death of Lazarus were neither a charade nor a sin.

So beware of those who suggest that genuine Christian living means transcending human heartache like some automaton. Christian contentment is not that at all. As stated earlier, contentment means having no need of assistance. So if we may paraphrase Spafford's song and Paul's testimony,

“Things are difficult and I feel very sad, but my soul needs no assistance.” Now we must ask what that means.

No Need of Assistance

Paul had been shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, etc. He had experienced sorrow and grief (Romans 9:2). Spafford had lost five children when he wrote this hymn. Yet the testimony of both Paul and Spafford was (if we may use the biblical definition) that of needing no assistance. It is well with my soul is comparable to saying I need no assistance; I am content with my lot.

But as a college student receiving a phone call in the middle of the night informing me of the death of my father in an automobile accident how could I say I needed no assistance? For weeks my heart raced and it was difficult to breath. I needed no assistance!? I felt like I needed all the assistance anyone could offer. I felt like I needed love and compassion and understanding and to be left alone. I needed some wise words. I felt like I needed someone to alter history, to go back in time and give a gentle nudge to the man who caused the accident. Of course this is science fiction. What I truly needed to recognize was that history was very much under control, and in the hands of one more powerful and wiser than me.

Sufficient Assistance

You see God is in control of history and has ordained even the most disastrous events for ultimate and eternal good (Ephesians 1:11). Of course that knowledge is not the only source of my contentment. When Paul had prayed that God would remove the thorn from his flesh, the answer given by God was one we find very consistent with our definition of contentment, **“My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:9)**. In other words, you have what you need. Contentment, you see, is the acknowledgement of God’s full provision. **“The young lions lack and suffer hunger; but those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good *thing*” (Psalm 34:10). “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).**

Full Provision

So in short, “it is well with my soul” does not mean I have a feeling of tranquility with the disastrous events of my life. What it does mean is that I recognize that my soul is in want of nothing; at the deepest level I have been fully provided for. The decision-making part of my being acknowledges that I serve a God who, as the confession states, **“..from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”**

Indiscriminate Grace

Of course the hymn doesn't end there. This grace and provision is not given indiscriminately. This wellness of soul is not something that can be claimed as a result of merely being part of creation. The natural man grasps at straws seeking to make sense of his tragedies. I was once at a memorial service of a young man. Broken-hearted, one of his teenage friends was wailing profusely. A teacher, seeking to comfort the young lady told her that the young man's soul could not depart until she stopped crying. The teacher then looked at me for affirmation. I felt like I had just taken a crazy pill. The peace we sing of is unique to God's children.

First Act of Grace

Peace in our souls, which comes from recognizing God's full provision in our lives, flows from reflecting upon God's first act of grace toward us. This is where Spafford leads us in the hymn.

*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!*

My Sin? What About My Pain

In its original form the second stanza of the hymn addresses the attacks of Satan, the trials of life, the acknowledgement by Christ of our helpless estate and His shed blood for the restoration of lost souls. It is recorded at the end of the notes. This then leads to the words above.

It may initially seem odd that Spafford would write of his own sin at a time when he was experiencing such grief. So far from pondering the glorious nature of our sins being nailed to the cross, many use their own misfortune as an opportunity to exercise poor behavior and lash out at people and God. This, of course, betrays something of ourselves. We pray God would try us and reveal to us our wicked ways. Trials succeed in doing this quite well.

Greater to Lesser

Why would this be the second (or third) stanza in a hymn of contentment through trials? The words of Paul may help us understand. In a portion of Scripture which begins with, **"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in**

us (Romans 8:18), Paul reveals one of those truths in Scripture which seem all too obvious after we learn it.

What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can be* against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things (Romans 8:31, 32)?

If God spared not His Son, do we think He will become remiss, or stingy, in other things? Theologians call this an argument from the greater to the lesser. Would I buy you a car and not give you the keys? Would I adopt a child and not give him clothes and food? Would I rescue children from the bondage of a despot, only to leave them helpless orphans? The Christian's recognition of wellness in their souls is dependent upon their continued and deepened understanding of the already given grace of Christ. God does not justify us then leave us as orphans; He adopts us. Again the Westminster Confession instructs us,

All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have His name put upon them, receive the spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father, yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation (Westminster Confession XII, 1).

Grace to Graces

Perhaps we can begin to recognize, yet one more reason, why it is critical for churches never to depart from preaching Christ and Him crucified. When our eyes are more fully opened to seize this great act of grace, the recognition of all other graces naturally follow. Spafford knew God would not save His soul and then leave him wandering in a pool of hopeless and meaningless despair. God vaporized our sin by the blood of His Son. We have become His purchased and precious possession. It is those who know and profess this in truth that are indeed lacking nothing.

*And Lord, haste the day when my 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.*

Spafford now reveals how like us all he truly was. For even though it was well with his soul – and even though he recognized that with the blood of Christ, he lacked nothing – he had an eye toward the unveiled fulfillment and realization of his redemption. As long as we are in this world and do battle with Satan, the world, and our own flesh, our warfare is sustained by hope. But in glory the hope, the faith, shall be sight. Paul writes,

In Him you also *trusted*, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise,¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory (Ephesians 1:13, 14).

The Holy Spirit grants us great hope in the promises of God until the redemption. On that day, the faith will be sight. We will not battle with our own natures and sing, “It is Well...” through our suffering. The suffering will cease and Spafford will be joined with his family to sing praises to their Savior untethered by human weakness. In that day the enjoyment of God will be in both soul and flesh. As Job writes,

For I know *that* my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth;²⁶ and after my skin is destroyed, this *I know*, that in my flesh I shall see God (Job 19:25, 26).

It Is Well With My Soul

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

It is well, with my soul,
It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet,
Though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

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!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh trump of the angel! Oh voice of the Lord!
Blessèd hope, blessèd rest of my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when my 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.

Questions for Study

1. What are some different definitions of the soul (page 2)?
2. How do you suppose Spafford was using the term in his hymn (pages 2, 3)?
3. What do the sea billows represent (page 3)?
4. What does it mean to be content (page 3)?
5. Is it promised to Christians that they will not experience heartache and sorrow (page 3)?
6. Why is it that Christians need no assistance (page 4)?
7. Is God's full and loving provision given to all indiscriminately (page 5)?
8. Why do you suppose Spafford, in the second stanza, sings of his own sin and forgiveness (page 5)?
9. Discuss the greater to the lesser argument (page 6)?
10. What is the day of redemption and how will things be different then (page 7)?