

# "IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL"

by Edgar McFadden

One of the most dramatic and touching hymn stories involving tragedy is the one associated with this gospel song. It is written by Horatio G. Spafford, a successful Chicago lawyer, and one who always maintained a keen interest in Christian activities.

In 1873, upon the advice of the family doctor, Spafford scheduled a European trip for his wife and their four daughters. He had expected to accompany the family but last-minute business affairs prevented him from going. The French liner was several days out from New York when it was rammed on a quiet sea by an English vessel on the morning of November 22nd. It was while the frantic and distressed passengers were crying and fighting to reach lifeboats that Mrs. Spafford saw her four little girls carried away by the waves. In two hours this luxurious ship settled to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean with a loss of some two hundred and twenty-six lives. Mrs. Spafford, however, was found floating in the water and was taken with the other survivors to Cardiff, Wales. The famous telegram of two words, "Saved alone" was sent to her husband.

He understood its import, that their children had drowned; and he said to a dear friend, "I am glad to trust the Lord when it costs me something." (See Zephaniah 3:12 and 2 Samuel 24:24). For him it was a second time of testing, coming almost too soon upon the heels of the first. He had bought a great deal of real estate on the shore of Lake Michigan. All of his holdings were wiped out in the Chicago Fire of October 8, 1871, and in the tragedy at sea he had lost his four precious children.

The distraught husband, as soon as he could, booked passage on a ship to Europe to join his wife. On the way over, in December of that same year, Captain Goodwin called Horatio Spafford to his private cabin and said, "I believe we are now passing over the place where the Ville du Havre went down." That night he found it hard to sleep while sailing over this "Gethsemane of sorrow." But faith soon conquered doubt, and there, in the mid-Atlantic, out of his heartbreak and pain, Horatio Spafford penned the words for the four stanzas to the immortal hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul." The first verse contained these lines:

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.

"Soul" denotes a breath of life, or a breathing creature. It includes all that pertains to man in the sense that a person is either somebody or everybody (Josh. 11:11, 14). Numbers are also reckoned in the Bible as souls. In 1 Peter 3:20 we read, "Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water."

There were ten generations from Adam to Noah in which the longsuffering of God was present. Each of these generations provoked God to anger (Gen. 6:5-6) and continued in their iniquity until the coming of the flood. Only Noah's family, amounting to eight persons, was saved in the ark. As the apostle Peter says, "The world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished" (1 Pet. 3:6).

The concept of human beings having life is verified in 1 Corinthians 15:45 which says, "And so it is written, The first Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit." The passage Paul quoted here is found in Genesis 2:7. Adam became a "living soul" when God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

One soul is more valuable than the whole world. Jesus told his disciples, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). The soul that dwells within the body of man is more valuable than all the wealth, glory, pleasure and power of earth. Therefore if a person should gain them all, and lose his own soul, then everything worthwhile in this life is lost forever.

There were incidents in the life of Paul that brought about sufferings and persecutions for the name of Christ, in the form of survivals of many deaths and merciless tortures from rods and stripes. The hardships he endured involved physical hunger, cold, nakedness, thirst, unending toil, as well as a day and a night in the ocean following a shipwreck. To hear the dreadful cry, "Abandon ship!" was a soul-chilling experience for any passenger. All methods of travel in Paul's day, whether by land or sea, were dangerous. One would encounter robbers on land and experience storms on the seas. The sufferings of Paul are enumerated for us in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27. Although these verses of Scripture address themselves to his particular circumstances, they can nevertheless be applied to specific life situations today.

Therefore Christians would do well if they emulated the apostle Paul for none of us knows what plight awaits us in our daily pilgrimage to heaven. In so doing we would join wholeheartedly with the hymn writer who was able to say with such convincing words, "Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul."