

## IT IS WELL – PEACE LIKE A RIVER

As we continue with this series of lessons I'm referring to as "Song Select" we'll consider the song – or at least the hymn that was contained within the song the choir sang\_ "It is Well with my Soul" by Horatio Spafford. Perhaps you've heard the background story for the song before.

*In November 1873, a French ocean liner was crossing the Atlantic from the U.S. to Europe with 313 passengers on board. Among them were Mrs. Anna Spafford and her 4 daughters. Her husband had stayed behind in Chicago to handle unexpected business, planning to join the family in Europe not long after.*

*About four days into the journey, the vessel collided with the Loch Earn. Mrs. Spafford hurriedly gathered her children, knelt on the deck, and prayed if it was His will, that God would either spare them, or help them to endure whatever the circumstances. Within minutes, the ship slipped beneath the dark waters of the Atlantic along with most of the passengers including the Spafford children.*

*A surviving sailor, spotted Anna clinging to a piece of the wreckage and hauled her into a row boat. They were soon picked up by another vessel which landed nine days later in Cardiff, Wales. From there, she wired her husband a message which began, "Saved alone, what shall I do?"*

*Horatio booked passage on the next available ship and left to join his grieving wife. The captain called Spafford to his cabin when they were over the place where his children went down\_ and according to a daughter born sometime after the tragedy, her father then wrote the lyrics to "It Is Well with My Soul."*

Before we go further, I want to remind you of the Apostle Paul's Instruction to the church in Corinth. So that the whole church would be edified (*built up and encouraged*), he wrote in **1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14:15**: **"I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also."** And, to the church in Colossae he also wrote in **Colossians 3:16**, **"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."** So it is certainly worth asking, does scripture support the concept that it can be well with our souls – that we can be at peace in the midst of trouble and tragedy?

The hymn speaks of finding consolation in the extremes; in times of peace as well as in sorrow. And though not specifically stated, it alludes to having peace even in spite of overwhelming sorrow. I don't know if the author had **Isaiah 66** in view when he penned the 1<sup>st</sup> verse, but I call attention to the text. **"Behold, I will extend peace (to her) like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>When you see, your heart will rejoice..." (12-14)** God did promise that "peace like a river" would attend the way of His people. Though the promise is to the Israelites, by extension, it includes we who are of Abraham's seed through our faith in Jesus.

The image is of Jerusalem being a city of peace and a place of refuge. Hardly what we see today. Though not popular theology, this is in part at least to her rejection of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who promised to usher in peace that is unlike anything the world offers. If one does not know Him, they will never know true peace. **(John 14:27)**

When I think of Jesus, I can't help but think of when He calmed a raging storm by commanding the winds, **"Peace! Be still."** **(Mark 4:39)** I personally believe that He is still capable of calming whatever anxieties, stilling any sorrows and dissipating any disappointments that threaten to disturb our peace today\_ and that He is also ready and willing to do so.

The peace and contentment that Horatio and Anna possessed came out of a personal relationship with Christ\_ a secure faith and trust in Him as their Savior and Lord. We, too, can know that “wellness” in our own souls that they had. We may not kneel on the deck of a sinking ship, but we might very likely kneel at the bedside of loved ones as their lives slip beneath the surface of all we see. We may not cling to a piece of wreckage in a sea of sorrow\_ but we may find ourselves struggling to stay afloat when our world is thrown into chaos by unexpected tragedy. How will we cope? It depends on where we rest our hope.

Take a look with me at the words of the Apostle Paul in **Philippians 4:4-13**. As we examine the passage, I want you to listen for some distinct concepts. The first is in **verse 7** where Paul speaks of “**Peace which passes all understanding.**” The second is found in **verse 12** where Paul says that he’d “**learned the secret of being content.**” The third is in **verse 13** where Paul says that he could “**do all things\_ through Christ.**” Those last two words tell us the source of these invaluable characteristics. The remaining text gives us practical counsel into how to tap into the amazing peace of God in Christ.

First he says: <sup>4</sup> **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** <sup>5</sup> **Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”** The very first thing we need to do is: **PERCEIVE THE LORD’S PRESENCE**. Paul knew that though he was in dire circumstances, confined to a dark, dank cell with no certainty that he would ever see the sun again, that he was not alone. We often think we have to go somewhere else to have quiet time with God\_ when in reality, all we have to do is open the eyes of our heart to see that He’s right here with us.

Next, Paul says <sup>6</sup> **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.** Recognizing the divine presence, we then need to **PETITION THE GOD OF PEACE**. Pray to Him, tell Him not just what’s going on but how it’s affecting you. Paul knew that God could bring light to his heart, if not to his cell. In fact, he assures us that if we do this...<sup>7</sup> **the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** Notice, it’s a peace that make no sense. It’s not rational. Why? Because though the situation may not change one iota, we do. Our perspective is transformed.

Reading on, he writes: <sup>8</sup> **Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.** When God takes control, our mind and hearts move off of our problems and onto His promises, as we **PONDER HIS PRINCIPLES**. This is more than occupying our minds with other things. It’s letting Christ captivate our thoughts. As we meditate on Jesus and what He endured for us\_ and what He secured for us, well, things that trouble us don’t trouble us as much as they did.

And then, Paul says: <sup>9</sup> **Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.** This is not just good therapy, it is sound theology. **PRACTICE HIS PRECEPTS**. Instead of pacing the floor, walk a few paces across the hall or street to help a neighbor. Instead of wringing your hands, find something productive to do with them. Make a meal for a shut in. Visit a nursing home or a hospital. Clear that attic or garage or basement of the stuff that’s just gathering dust and give it to someone who can use it.

Paul sums up with these words: <sup>10</sup> **I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.**

**<sup>11</sup> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. <sup>12</sup> I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup> I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.**

Contextually, Paul is saying that the secret of continual contentment is found not in a divine formula but in a divine fellowship. Our connection with Christ can enable us too also say “**It is Well...**” no matter what the crisis. We can praise Him in any storm, trust Him in any trial, and find comfort in any sorrow. Why? **Because the God of Peace is with us**, offering peace that passes all understanding, we can not only stay calm, we can rejoice. For we know that peace like a river will attend our way, when we truly understand that Jesus is our Way; that He is the path to peace.