

It Is Well With My Soul

By Maggie Moller

Author

Horatio Gates Spafford was born October 20, 1828, in North Troy, New York. He married his bride, Anna, in 1861 and moved to Chicago where he became a very successful businessman and lawyer. When the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 burned the city to the ground, Horatio lost all his real estate holdings along Lake Michigan. Immediately, he set to work helping rebuild the city and assisting the many left homeless.

In 1873, he decided to take his wife and four daughters on a vacation to Europe to see his friend D.L. Moody at one of his revival meetings. Unexpected business came up that prevented Horatio from leaving on their set departure date. Not wanting to hold up his family, he sent them on ahead, promising to meet up with them in Europe. His family set out across the Atlantic on the *S.S. Ville du Havre* passenger liner. Tragically, on the night of November 22, the *S.S. Ville du Havre* collided with the *Lock Earn*, an English vessel, and sank within 12 minutes. Of the 273 passengers, only 47 survived. Horatio's wife Anna was found nearly unconscious, clinging to a piece of wreckage, but none of their four daughters survived. When Anna reached Wales, she sent this message home: "Saved alone, what shall I do?"

Filled with grief, Horatio set out at once to meet his wife. During the journey, the captain of the ship Horatio had boarded pointed out the location where he believed the *S.S. Ville du Havre* went down. Horatio returned to his cabin and wrote, "It is well; the will of God be done." Later, he wrote the beautiful hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul," based on these words.

After the shipwreck, Horatio and Anna had two more daughters, and in 1881, the family moved to Jerusalem. There Horatio helped start a mission called the "American Colony," which served the sick and destitute. Four days before his 60th birthday, Horatio died of malaria in Jerusalem on October 16, 1888, and was buried at Mount Zion Cemetery outside the walls of the Old City.

Composer

Philip Paul Bliss was born on July 9, 1838, in Clearfield County, Pennsylvania. His first introduction to music came from his father, Isaac, who loved music and taught young Philip to sing. Part of his early education also came from his mother, who taught him to read and write. At age eleven, he left home to make a living for himself and worked at lumber camps and sawmills while attending school. He was raised in a Christian family and made a personal confession of faith in Christ at age twelve. During this time, Philip spent some of his savings on music lessons and began to participate in Methodist camp meetings and revival services.

When he turned seventeen, he completed the requirements for a teaching license and began teaching at a school in Hartsville, New York. In 1857, he met J.G. Tower, who owned a vocal school in Pennsylvania. Tower recognized Philip's rare singing talent and provided him with formal vocal training. When attending a musical convention, Philip also met William Bradbury, a composer of sacred music who encouraged Philip to use his talents for the Lord's service.

Around this time, Philip met Lucy Young, a poet from a musical family, and the two were soon married. To increase his income, Philip began taking in music students, but though he enjoyed teaching, he realized the limitations of his training. Lucy's grandmother graciously provided him with the thirty dollars needed to attend the Normal Academy of Music in New York. After his training, Philip began working as a professional music instructor and began composing music. One evening, he decided to attend a local revival meeting led by D.L. Moody. During the singing, Philip's voice stood out, and Moody approached him about becoming a singing evangelist.

Philip began to use his talents solely for the service of the Lord by writing only gospel hymns, including the music for "It Is Well With My Soul." Rather than use his profits for himself, he declined all copyright royalties and distributed the money, totaling nearly \$60,000, to charities.

In December 1876, Philip and his wife were traveling on a train near Ashtabula, Ohio. The train was traveling over a bridge when the bridge collapsed. Although Philip survived the initial crash, he went back into the flames and perished in an unsuccessful attempt to save his wife.

The stories of these two men may seem very tragic to us, and by earthly standards they are indeed very much so. How then can we be encouraged by learning about their lives? Although these two men had many reasons in their lives to give up hope and turn to despair, they were able to press on in Christ because they knew that this life is only for a time while heaven is for eternity. I hope the history of “It Is Well With My Soul” has encouraged you to also press on, even when life seems overwhelmingly difficult at times. We have Christ living in our hearts to guide us, encourage us, and lift us up. When we see life through this perspective, we can truly say, “It is well with my soul!” just as Mr. Spafford and Mr. Bliss did so many years ago.