

WHEN PEACE, LIKE A RIVER, ATTENDETH MY SOUL

Horatio Gates Spafford

Horatio Gates Spafford (20th October 1828-88) was a successful lawyer and wealthy businessman in Chicago. He was also a devout Christian, along with his wife Anna, and young family, - four daughters and a son. There's was the type of family that had everything ... they had the Lord, and they had all the comforts and privilege money could buy. Their friends included D.L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey.

However, they also knew tragedy and tears. Their only son, - four-year-old Horatio Jr, - died of scarlet fever. Then, a year later in October 1871, a massive fire swept through Chicago, devastating the city, including properties owned by Spafford. That same fire killed almost three hundred people, and 100,000 were made homeless. Despite their own personal loss, Horatio and his family used what they had left to help others. Gradually, their wealth was restored.

Two years after the fire, in 1873, Spafford decided to give his family a holiday in England, - he knew their friends Moody and Sankey were preaching and singing in Edinburgh, so he hoped they could meet up. (While in Edinburgh, Moody and Sankey raised £10,000 to build a new home for the Carrubbers Close Mission, and Moody preached at the laying of the foundation stone.)

Horatio Spafford was not able to travel with his family because of business commitments. Nevertheless, he brought his wife Anna, his eleven-year-old daughter Anna, nine-year-old daughter Margaret Lee, five-year-old daughter Elizabeth, and two-year-old daughter Tanetta to the docks, and they boarded the ship, S.S. Ville du Havre, and set sail on 21st November 1873. Horatio expected to follow in a few days.

About four days into the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean their ship collided with a Scottish ship, the Loch Earn and began to let in water at an alarming rate. Anna hurriedly brought her four children to the deck, knelt with them and prayed for God to spare them if that would be His will, or to make them willing to endure whatever awaited them. Within approximately 12 minutes, their ship sank, carrying with it 226 of the passengers including the four daughters ... Anna, Margaret Lee, Elizabeth, and Tanetta.

A sailor, rowing a small boat over the spot where the ship went down, spotted a woman floating on a piece of the wreckage. It was Anna, the mother, still alive. He pulled her into his boat and they were picked up by another large vessel

which, nine days later, landed them in Cardiff, Wales. She told a friend, “God gave me four daughters. Now they have been taken from me. Someday I will understand why”. From Cardiff she sent a telegram to her husband with the simple and distressing message, “Saved alone. What shall I do?”

Immediately, Horatio boarded a ship to be with his wife. When his ship was about four days out at sea, the captain called him to his cabin and told him they were over the place where his children went down. ... And that was where he wrote the hymn,

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 last verse, - which isn't in most of our hymn books says ...

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.

Horatio and Anna were reunited, and Anna went on to give birth to three more children, - Horatio (named after their previous son who had died), Bertha and Grace. Tragedy struck again, though, when young Horatio died on 11th February 1880 with pneumonia/scarlet fever ... also at the age of four. Shortly afterwards, the family moved to Jerusalem and established a work among the poor and homeless. And that is where Horatio died and was buried on 16th October 1888, and Anna later in 1923.

Philip Bliss (1838-1876) wrote the music to this hymn, - he called the tune *Ville du Havre*, after the name of the stricken vessel ... and the hymn was published by Bliss and Sankey in 1876.

... It seems as if so many of the old hymns were borne out of sadness and tragedy. Many of them came from the pens of people who suffered great heartache. They weren't silly sentiments, but words written from *real* experience.

The heartbreak of Horatio and Anna Spafford reminds me of Job, - even though he too had faced so much tragedy, - ... despite it all, he declared, **Job 33:4** *The Spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life.* ... Human life ... New life ... Abundant life ... Eternal life. ... But how can we

understand that? Unless you and I had suffered how they had suffered, how can we understand it?! ... How did Horatio Spafford understand it?

Instead of becoming hopelessly enveloped in his sorrow, - which would have been understandable, - here is part of what he wrote,

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.

... "Let this blest assurance control" ... That is almost the same as Job said to God, **Job 10:13** *And these things hast thou hid in thine heart: I know that this is with thee.*

Job was in the depths of misery, - all his family had been lost, - cruelly taken away by death. His livelihood was gone, and he could not rely on the support of his wife or those who came to comfort him, and sadly he declared, **Job 19:9** *He hath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head.* **10** *He hath destroyed me on every side, and I am gone.*

Job was surrounded by accusations of wrongdoing by his friends. "Job, you have done something terribly wrong to incur the wrath of God!" ... And they 'lifted up every stone' and 'looked in every corner' as they examined what it was he had done. ... That is what happened to Horatio Spafford too, - when he 'got back up on his feet again, - many Christians accused him of bringing about his own tragedies, - basically, they were a judgment from God. ... Job's heart was breaking. His mind was turning over and over, **Job 19:2** *How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words?* he asked his friends. "You keep coming back at me with all your accusations" ... **6** *Know now that God hath overthrown me, and hath compassed me with his net ...* **8** *He hath fenced up my way that I cannot pass, and he hath set darkness in my paths* "There is nowhere I can go to escape the heaviness of my burden".

Look at v.11 and the turmoil Job was suffering, **11** *He hath also kindled his wrath against me, and he counteth me unto him as one of his enemies ...* **13** *He hath put my brethren far from me, and mine acquaintance are verily estranged from me.* **14** *My kinsfolk have failed, and my familiar friends have forgotten me.* **15** *They that dwell in mine house, and my maids, count me for a stranger: I am an alien in their sight.* His suffering must have been mighty! ... And the sufferings of Horatio and Anna Spafford must have been terrible too ... But go further and you will see the even greater suffering of Another, ... the suffering of another man whose brethren

positioned themselves far from Him, and Whose friends became ‘estranged’ from Him and forgot Him ... the Man for Whom these words reach their pinnacle, ⁹ He hath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head. ... The One Who has suffered more than any man, **Is. 53:3** ... despised and rejected ... a man of sorrows, ... acquainted with grief.

That’s Jesus ... **Job 19:9** He [*God the Father*] hath stripped me [*Christ the Son*] of my glory, and taken the crown [*of glory*] from my head. ... **Phil. 2:6** Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: ⁷ But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: ⁸ And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. At Calvary, He cried, **Mk. 15:34** My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? ... **THE WORDS THE SAVIOUR SPOKE** ... When Jesus came to Bethlehem and Nazareth, He stepped out from the glory of Heaven to save His people, **Heb. 2:9** But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. ... For to purchase His people unto Himself redemption demanded He pay the purchase price ... and He was stripped of His glory ... and the crown of Heaven was removed from His head.

That is how these words of Job’s point towards the Man of Calvary. Job’s predicament was horrendous, as was Horatio and Anna Spafford’s ... but what Jesus suffered on Calvary was beyond anything the human mind could comprehend, **Heb. 4:15** we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin, - He is not sitting away up in the clouds, totally oblivious to the sufferings of His people, but in fact, His example of coming into this world and dying on the cross of Calvary puts it all into its proper perspective, as Spafford wrote,

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.

It is hard, and it’s difficult ... Anna wrote that desperate telegram to her husband, “Saved alone. What shall I do?” ... And what did her husband do? He came all the way across the ocean to be with her. Does that not point towards another even more beautiful picture, of which we read in **Is.41**, ¹⁰ Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. ... When I could not get up to Him, He came down to me.

He knows the way that we take. He knows what is in front of us before we get there, and His Word assures us, **I Cor. 10:13** *There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it, - that is His promise! ... It will be hard me, - that is the kind of world we live in, - but that is His promise, and He keeps His Word.*

And on Calvary, the Father kept His Word by sending His Son to the cross for us ... **The words the Saviour spoke,** *Job 19:9 He hath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head.* ... Those words also illustrate **The Way the Saviour Took.**

Look at them again, *Job 19:9 He hath stripped me of my glory,* - there was no other direction the Saviour took but downwards. From the moment in God's plan when He left the Glory of Heaven, every step He took brought Him lower and lower. ... Even if, - as the wise men from the east thought, - even if He had been born in a palace it still would have been a downward path for nothing of earth's grandeur compares with Heaven's glory!

He held no bank account. He hadn't His Name on the title deeds of any earthly mansion. Horatio Spafford had far more than Jesus ever had on this earth, in fact, every one of us here has more on this earth than Jesus had! ... In every way, our Saviour was stripped of His glory ...

He couldn't have stooped any lower! He was seen with tax collectors and prostitutes. He spoke with the demon-possessed and with the lepers. He helped the Roman centurion and healed his servant. He spoke about paying the dues to the Roman Caesar. ... If the ordinary Jewish man had drawn up a list to describe how he envisaged the Messiah ... Jesus would have failed at every turning!

And yet in the plan and purposes of God our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, *made himself of no reputation* ... stripped of His glory, and the crown removed from His head ... **The words the Saviour spoke, the way the Saviour took** ...

THE WEAKNESS THE SAVIOUR ENDURED

The Saviour, as the Second Person of the Trinity, had participated in the creation of the heavens and the earth, **Hab. 3:6** *He stood, and measured the earth: he beheld, and drove asunder the nations; and the everlasting mountains were scattered, the perpetual hills did bow: his ways are everlasting.* ... That is the Saviour Who at Calvary couldn't even tear His hand away from the wooden cross to which He

had been nailed! We watch and see how all His strength and power had been *drained* from Him, while His Father would allow nothing to ease the pain. His Son was suffering on our behalf ... *abandoned* on the cruel cross.

Eighteen hundred or so years earlier father Abraham had lifted Isaac onto the altar because God had instructed him to sacrifice his son. Isaac did not die though ... Abraham did not have to kill his only son for instead, the Lord provided a substitute ... and a ram died in Isaac's place. There was no substitute for Christ at Calvary though, for *He* died the perfect Sacrifice ... all our sins were laid upon Him, and swept away forever, never to be remembered by God against His people. ... **The weakness the Saviour endured.**

THE WEIGHT THE SAVIOUR CARRIED

At Calvary, all thoughts of Heaven and His Father were clouded by the sin Jesus bore. Consider how, if every time you transgressed the law of God you had to place just an ordinary brick into a bag on your back ... you just imagine how heavy that weight would now have become. ... Then think about the weight of sin on the back and on the shoulders of the Lord Jesus, - all my sin, all your sin, all the sin of God's people. All the jagged edges digging into Him and tearing His skin. carried Such a burdensome load placed upon the perfect Son of God!

But that is not it all ... When you are bearing a heavy load and you need someone to help you but they all turn away ... your friends aren't there any longer ... And Jesus, - with the burden weighing upon Him, - looked to His Father for relief, - but because the filthiness of the load offended His Father, even His loving Father turned away, - the Father turned away from His Son. ... And Jesus carried the burden of our sins alone! ... He hath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head.

The words the Saviour spoke, the way the Saviour took, the weakness the Saviour endured, the weight the Saviour carried ...

THE WORTHLESSNESS HE ADOPTED

What must it have been like for the Sovereign God of Heaven to be humiliated on the cross of Calvary by the people He came to save, the people He loved, the people who were the 'apple of His eye'!

Early in the morning they took Him out, they tore the garments from off Him, and they nailed Him to a tree ... There was another man and with him also they had taken off his clothes and nailed him to a tree ... but he deserved it! ... And

there was another man, - one of his fellow-criminals, - and he too was stripped and crucified ... and here Jesus was in between the two rightly-condemned men! ... There could not have been anything further from the glory of Heaven than the cross of the Saviour on the hill of Calvary!

... And remember ... He didn't have to go to the cross, He wasn't obligated in any way. Our sins were our own business, - we committed them, we should pay the penalty for them. He didn't *owe* me salvation ... and yet He chose to appear in front of all those people at Calvary who hated Him ... and they stripped our Saviour of His glory and they tore the crown from His head.

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!

After He died, He was taken down from the cross ... His work there had been finished. He was laid in a tomb, from which He arose on the third day. As Gen. 3:15 prophesied, Satan was permitted to bruise the heel of the Lord Jesus but our Saviour had eternally, indefatigably and irrevocably bruised his head.

Jesus walked the path none other could walk and He fought the battle none other could win ... Look on down Job 19 to see the confidence this old suffering man of God enjoyed, - **Job. 19:25** *For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: 26 And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.*

That is the same hope Anna Spafford had when she prayed with her children on that sinking boat in the Atlantic Ocean ... when she handed them into God's care ... It is the same hope she continued to have when, - heartbroken, - she later said to a friend, "God gave me four daughters. Now they have been taken from me. Someday I will understand why". That is the same hope her husband also had for, - just like Job, - their confidence was in the Lord, and they were waiting for Him,

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.

And listen again to the words of the verse absent from our hymnbooks,

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.

That's when all the questions will fade away. That is when we will fully realise, **Mk. 7:37** He hath done all things well ... **I Cor. 13:12** For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. ... **I Jn. 3:2** Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. ... As Job answered those men, bringing their accusations before him, he told them, **Job 12:7** But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: **8** Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. **9** Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the LORD hath wrought this? **10** In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.

... Our God is sovereign. There is nothing outside of His will and there is nothing beyond His control, - and His Word assures us, **Rom. 8:28** all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose ...

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!