

## ***“Singing the Faith: Peace Like a River”***

*Isaiah 66:7-14 • Philippians 4:4-13*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear August 18, 2024

The Methodist movement in England was started by John Wesley, an Anglican priest in the early 1700s. Beginning when he was in college, Wesley and others gathered together in small groups to study the Bible, which they did according to specific “methods,” which is where the term Methodist came from. The people who called them that intended it to be an insult but the name stuck. These small groups became an important part of their methods and are still an important part of being a disciple of Jesus.

At their small group meetings, Wesley would have the participants ask one another, “How is it with your soul?” As 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans we spend a lot of time thinking about our bodies and our minds and our feelings. But I don’t think we spend enough time thinking about our souls. Your soul is the “real” you. It’s the part of you that is eternal and it’s the part of you that is connected with God. But just like your body and your mind, your soul must be fed and nourished. So let me ask you, how is it with *your* soul? And how do you know?

A good place to start would be to look at the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 and ask yourself, “am I growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?” Would other people say they see these in your life? Are you anxious or are you fully trusting in God. Most of us are probably somewhere in the middle. How is it with your soul?

I think one of the things that gets in the way of experiencing God’s peace is the very common yet false idea that God is watching our every move and that if I’m good He will bless me and keep bad things from happening to me, and if I’m bad He’s going to punish me. So when something bad happens you ask why God is punishing you. But that’s not biblical. Jesus said, “In this world you *will* have trouble.” In Romans 8:18, Paul writes, “I consider that the *sufferings* of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” God

never promises to protect us from suffering. But He does promise to be with us when we’re going through it.

This morning we are continuing our short series on Singing the Faith, looking at the stories and the Scriptures behind some of the greatest hymns. In the 1860s, Horatio Spafford was a successful young attorney in Chicago. He was a senior partner in his law firm and a Presbyterian elder. He and his wife Anna had a growing family and a nice home. In the spring of 1871, Spafford had begun investing heavily in real estate north of Chicago. Then in October of that year the Great Chicago Fire reduced most of the city, and all of Spafford’s investments, to ashes.

Two years later, in 1873, the Spaffords decided to travel with their four daughters by luxury ocean liner to England where their friend Dwight L. Moody would be preaching. At the last minute Horatio was delayed with work so he sent Anna and their four daughters ahead to England and he planned to join them a couple of days later. Four days into the voyage their ship collided with another and sank within twelve minutes. Anna was found unconscious on a piece of the wreckage and was rescued. Their four daughters all drowned. When she arrived in England she sent a telegraph to Horatio that read, “Saved alone. What shall I do?”

Horatio took the next ship to England to meet his wife. The captain of the ship called Spafford to his cabin to tell him they were approaching the spot where his four daughters had died. That moved him to write these now famous words: “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.” What Spafford is saying is that whether things are going great, peace is flowing like a river, not drying up, or things are going very badly, wave after wave of sorrow and tragedy, it is well with his soul because it is in God’s hands.

In our reading from Philippians 4, the Apostle Paul says, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” The secret to all these situations is what Spafford discovered – it’s trusting in Jesus. In Romans 8 Paul says, “I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,<sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Whatever my lot, it is well with my soul.

“Though Satan should buffet, tho’ trials should come, let this blest assurance control, that Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed His own blood for my soul.” As a Presbyterian elder, Spafford taught an adult Sunday School class in his church. He knew the Scriptures well and his hymn reflects that knowledge. Romans 5 says, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— **but God** shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” James 1 teaches us, “Count it all joy, my brothers,<sup>[b]</sup> when you meet trials of various kinds,<sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”

The point of the hymn is to express trust in God in the face of incredible tragedy and challenges. I imagine that when Spafford wrote these words that on some level he was expressing the faith he *desired* to have. We don’t really know how we will respond to tragedy until it happens. But we can know the assurance that God gives us. As Hebrews 10 tells us, “Therefore since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his

flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

When the earthly things that Spafford valued were all taken away from him, he was able to see what really mattered in life. It wasn’t the great job, the nice clothes, or the beautiful home. The only things that mattered was this: “My sin – O the bliss of the 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!” As Colossians 2 puts it, “you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” When you understand this, that Jesus has paid the penalty for your sin, you will understand the message of the entire Bible. You will know the love of God personally. You were dead in your sins but God made you alive in Christ and forgave you! If you understand this it will change your life. You can’t help but say “praise the Lord, O my soul!”

The other thing that happens is that it changes your behavior. Once you experience a little of God’s perfect peace in your life, you want to do whatever it takes to have more of it. So what *does* it take to be able to say, “it is well with my soul?” I think the answer can be found in our reading from Philippians and it can be summed up with four words: pray, think, do, and rejoice.

Verse 6 says, “do not be anxious about anything.” Sounds easy, right? “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by

prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Notice that supplication and thanksgiving are actually types of prayer. What we find here are the three types of prayers: help me, thank you, and I love you. Most of us spend more time in prayer asking for things from God. Think about this, do you enjoy spending time with people who only want you to give them things? Not really. God wants to spend time with you and we do that in prayer. Sometimes that kind of prayer doesn’t even use words. It’s just intentionally being with Jesus.

The second thing that will help you have peace that surpasses understanding is in verses 8 and 9. Paul says to “think about” the goodness of God. We would call this meditation. Anybody can do this. Have you ever worried about something? Good. You know how to meditate. Worrying is just a negative meditation. Instead, the Bible teaches us that we are to think about, or meditate, on the attributes of God – true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise. Some people find it helpful to make notes about what they’re thinking about and then look at them later.

Third, Paul says in verse 9, “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—*practice* these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” In other words, don’t just be a hearer of the word, but a doer. Love God and love people. You can and should love people in real, tangible ways, meeting their needs.

Finally, In verse 4 Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” The result of experiencing God in both the good times and the bad will be rejoicing. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

In the years after the shipwreck, the Spaffords began to rebuild their lives but also continued to experience tragedies. In 1878 they had a another daughter, Bertha, and two years later they had a son, Horatio. But when he was four, Horatio died in a Scarlet Fever epidemic. People in their church began to ask what the Spaffords had done to deserve God’s punishment. They ended up leaving the church they had helped build. Along with a number of friends they moved to Jerusalem to seek comfort and direction from God. They formed what was called the American Colony. Their goal was not to convert the Muslims and Jews living in Jerusalem but instead to live like the early church depicted in Acts 2. As a result, they were able to build friendships with others and ended up serving them during times of crisis such as World War I. Their work continues in Jerusalem to this day.

You and I have the opportunity to do the same thing. We can choose to be a community of faith that seeks to devote ourselves to growing in our faith, spending time together, and serving our neighbors. We can choose to learn to be content in every situation, whether we are experience peace or trials. The only way to be successful is to depend on Christ who strengthens us so that we can say “it is well with our souls.” Friends, how is it with *your* soul?

*Amen.*