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The State of Your Soul

Over one hundred years ago, Horatio Spafford was a Chicago lawyer who endured a great deal of hardship. During the Chicago fire of 1871 he lost virtually all his assets, which had been invested in Chicago real estate. Before the fire his family had planned a trip to Europe to visit relatives, and so despite the tragic fire, he sent his wife and daughters ahead via ship, as planned. He intended to see what could be salvaged of his belongings and his assets, and follow his family in a few weeks on a second ship. But days later, Spafford received a telegram from his wife reading, "Saved alone." This was how he learned the heart-breaking news that the ship carrying Spafford's wife and daughters was struck mid-Atlantic by another vessel, and only Spafford's wife had survived. All four of his daughters perished.

Spafford quickly boarded a ship to join his grieving wife. When his ship was en route and passing the spot where his family's vessel had been struck and his daughters had died days earlier, Spafford took out pen and paper and wrote the words that have become a beloved hymn. You may remember the 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.'"

Of course Spafford could have caved in to despair and none of us would have blamed him. He could have chosen to wallow in resentment and bitterness for the remainder of his life, and which of us could condemn him? He had experienced the kind of enormous and life-shaking misfortune that many people cannot find any way to bear. Yet Spafford did endure. His immortal words demonstrate that. How was he able to do it? How could he claim, despite the circumstances, that all was well with his soul?

Spafford's story offers insight into a possibility for contentment and confidence we often overlook. We busy, distractible, over-worked and over-wrought 21st century people are frequently unable to differentiate the state of our life circumstances from the state of our souls. Or maybe we just don't stop to consider that there is more to our well-being than material good fortune. We've lost our ability to monitor the state of our souls. Without that ability, the circumstances of our daily lives can feel overwhelmingly threatening and harsh. But if we are capable of considering the state of our souls, and nurturing their soundness, we find we have ballast with which to withstand the buffeting of life's storms.

How is your soul these days? If it needed some calming or strengthening or healing, would you know where to turn? Maybe if you've neglected the health and well-being of your soul lately, a good place to start in restoring its healthy significance in your life is to remember the immortal words of St. Paul. He, like Spafford, and like many of us, endured enormous misfortune, but could relay to others his source of strength. Said Paul: "I have learned to be content with whatever I have... I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

What strengthens you? Is it well with your soul? We hope so.