

Feature

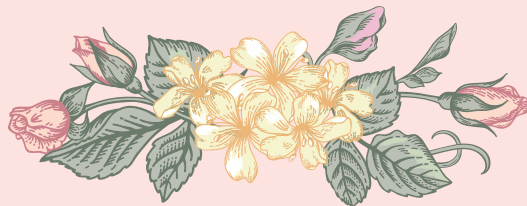


PLEASE PASS *the* SUGAR BOWL

ISTOCKPHOTO

If this season is bittersweet, may a hymn and an heirloom inspire you to be thankful in all things.

by GREG ASIMAKOUPoulos



WHEN HORATIO SPAFFORD sat with his wife, Anna, and their four daughters at Thanksgiving in November 1871, I'm guessing he had to think twice when asked to pass the sugar bowl. Life had been anything but sweet in recent weeks. On October 9, Spafford, a successful Chicago attorney, anxiously watched as wind-swept flames swallowed up 10 square blocks of office buildings and homes along Lake Michigan. Among the smoldering ash heaps were several of Spafford's prized investment properties. The Christian lawyer, who was a personal friend of evangelist Dwight L. Moody, had lost a fortune.

It is also quite likely that the words of the apostle Paul stuck in Horatio's throat while he swallowed his turkey dinner: "Give thanks in everything; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18). How could he be grateful when life was anything but sweet? But as he looked around the family table at his beloved Anna and his four darling daughters, Spafford realized his true wealth had not gone up in smoke. He sensed the presence of a faithful God. How very grateful he was for a godly wife who was teaching their girls to love Jesus.

TWO ANCHORS OF FAITH

Two Thanksgivings later, Horatio sat alone at an empty table. No turkey or pumpkin pie. No appetite. A grateful, yet broken heart once again

pulsated with pain. In an effort to move beyond the devastation surrounding their financial ruin from the Great Chicago Fire, the Spaffords had planned an extended family vacation in England. The family of six had traveled by train to New York to board a ship. Sadly, unexpected business dealings had required Horatio to return to Chicago just as the family was about to embark. He had waved good-bye to his wife and four girls, ages 2 to 11, as the *Ville du Havre* sailed out of New York harbor toward England. He had assured them he would join them in a few weeks.

And then the unthinkable. The vessel had collided with another ship in the North Atlantic. Within 12 minutes the *Ville du Havre* had sunk as 226 passengers lost their lives. Although many, including Horatio's wife, had been saved by the crew of another ship, all four Spafford daughters had drowned. Upon reaching England, Anna had sent her husband a telegram.

As Horatio sat at the family table, he could only ponder his wife's telegram summarized by two words: *Saved alone*. In his grief, he was grateful his sweetheart had been spared. He gave thanks that all his girls were safe with Jesus now. He found the inner strength to celebrate that God was in control. Having sensed God's peace in the aftermath of the Great Chicago Fire two years earlier, he had learned that the granules of God's grace could sweeten the bitter taste of tragedy. Beneath the ache of his broken heart, he felt an unexplainable peace. In the depth of his soul, all was well.

A few days later, Spafford booked passage for England to join Anna. When the ship sailed near the area where the *Ville du Havre* had gone down, Horatio stood on the deck and penned a poem articulating his emotions. Little did he realize his lines would be sung as a hymn in churches for generations to come:

“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.”

“And, Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll, The trump shall re-sound, and the Lord shall descend, ‘Even so,’ it is well with my soul.”

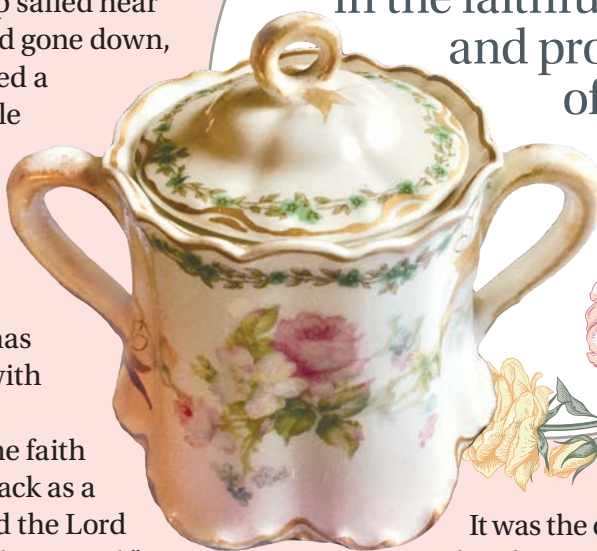
Spafford’s well-loved hymn reveals two anchors that kept his faith afloat when the waves of misfortune crashed in around him. One was God’s faithfulness in days gone by. On several occasions, God had sustained him and filled him with inner peace in the midst of incredible trials. The other anchor that stabilized Spafford on his life journey was God’s promises for the future. Horatio and Anna had become avid students of the end times and the second coming of Christ. They knew what the Bible taught of the hope we have in death and the victorious reign of Christ that will accompany His return to earth. No wonder his famous hymn concludes with reference to that blessed hope.

TWO HANDLES OF THE SUGAR BOWL

My little Norwegian grandmother had a saying I’ve never forgotten. With a twinkle in her eye she would say, “You’ve got to take the bitter with the sweet in this life.” And for Nana Birkeland, it was possible to be grateful for both. She, like Horatio Spafford, had learned from years of walking with the Lord that genuine gratitude is rooted in the faithfulness and promises of God.

One of my grandmother’s possessions I was privileged to inherit was her favorite sugar bowl.

Genuine
gratitude is rooted
in the faithfulness
and promises
of God.



It was the centerpiece of her dining room table. It was there every Thanksgiving. It’s not that fancy. The hand-painted design is faded from years of use. It certainly wouldn’t be appraised for much. But to me, Nana’s sugar bowl is priceless. It calls to mind holiday gatherings in her wonderful old home.

But it also reminds me of something else. I’ve come to ascribe meaning to the two handles of that sugar bowl. Those handles have come to remind me of the two realities onto which I can hold no matter how hard life gets: God’s faithfulness and God’s promises.

So when you pass the sugar bowl at Thanksgiving dinner this year, think twice. Thank God for the sweet things you tend to take for granted. Then thank Him that He will not abandon you when the bitter times come. Because our God is trustworthy and loving, the gratitude we express around the family table need not be limited to blessings of the year just past. We can learn to say with the apostle Paul, “Give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18). ☪

GREG ASIMAKOUPoulos is the chaplain of Covenant Shores Retirement Community in Mercer Island, Washington. He is the author of 10 books, including *Finding God in It’s a Wonderful Life* published by eChristian.



LESS *Chaos.* MORE *Jesus*

sacredholidays.com/book