

The Health & Wealth Gospel - Part 1

25 April 2023



In 1873, a wealthy Christian businessman by the name of Horatio Spafford received a cryptic telegram from his wife, which simply said, “Saved alone”. Little did he know how those two words would change his life, forever.

It had already been a difficult few years for Horatio. In 1871, his four-year-old son had tragically passed away. Shortly thereafter, a massive blaze in the city of Chicago had destroyed many properties. This fire all but destroyed his business, for he was heavily invested in real estate.

This hard knock to his business was followed by an economic down-turn in 1873, which prompted him to move his family across the Atlantic to England. There he planned to support the evangelistic work being done by D.L Moody. In a last-minute change of plans, he sent his family on a steamboat ahead of him with the plan to catch up with them after he got there. But, as it turned out, it was not to be.

On this trip, he wrestled in his heart with God and finally wrote the now-famous hymn, *‘It is well with my soul’*.

Tragedy struck again when the steamboat on which Horatio’s wife and kids were travelling had a mid-ocean collision and promptly sank! It took 226 souls with it beneath the waves, including all four of Horatio’s daughters.

Fortunately, his wife, Anna, was later rescued, floating unconscious on a piece of flotsam. Nine days after making it to land, Anna telegraphed her husband with the agonising words, “Saved alone. What shall I do?” Horatio immediately took a boat trip across the same ocean to fetch his wife. On this trip, he wrestled in his heart with God and finally wrote the now-famous hymn, *‘It is well with my soul’*.

It Is Well With My Soul

Here are some notable lines from his song that give us insight into how he came to terms with his loss, and an incredible life lesson on how we should do the same:

*“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.*

*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.*

*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.*

*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!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul.*

*And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
A song in the night, oh my soul!”*

Why Did We Come to Christ?

If you don't have a story of tragedy and loss like Horatio's, you undoubtedly will before your faith journey is done. In times of loss, the very foundation of our faith is tested and revealed for what it is. A crucially important question will be asked of you, 'Why did you come to Christ in the first place?' or 'Why are you a Christian?'

Horatio's song reveals his answer to this question. He had found '*an anchor for [his] soul*' (Hebrews 6:19) that goes beyond the grave. Peace, even in the middle of the storms of life. He sings about the blood of Jesus shed for his salvation. He sings about his vision of eternity with Christ. He sings about living for Christ. He sings about how faith shall one day be replaced with sight.

And so I ask you now: is your faith founded on the same stuff?

The Health & Wealth Gospel

One reason that people have the wrong expectations has to do with a very pervasive false teaching that has infiltrated much of the Pentecostal church. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul warns about false teachers who will corrupt the Gospel. We are told that these men *"imagine that godliness is a way to material gain"* (1 Timothy 6:5).

He goes on to give a sobering warning about how we think about material wealth, *"Of course, godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, so we cannot carry anything out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. Those who want to be rich, however, fall into temptation and become ensnared by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. By craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows."* (1 Timothy 6:6-10)

As I read these words, I am painfully reminded of how many false teachers in my home continent of Africa have led people down this path by preaching a message that causes many thousands to come to Christ as a means to material gain.

The problem is that this false gospel sets people up for a faith crisis...when God allows testing and sifting to come.

One of the qualifications for eldership given earlier in the book of 1 Timothy is that a preacher should *"not [be] a lover of money"* (1 Timothy 3:1-7). Unfortunately, many preachers are still in love with money and it perverts the Gospel that they preach. They preach a gospel that appeals to the carnal desire for material wealth.

The problem is that this false gospel sets people up for a faith crisis later in their journey when God allows testing and sifting to come.

Regarding healing, health is a wonderful blessing but, again, we must not think of godliness as a *means* to attain healing. If my motive for being a Christian and following Christ is *so that* I will be guaranteed good health in my life, then my good health has become an idol that is more precious to me than Christ. Yes, we can ask and trust God for healing, but our heart motivations will be tested. Like Job, there will come a time when God will ask you, *"Will you continue to worship Me, even in sickness?"*

Apostolic Teaching

Horatio's song revealed that his faith was not based upon the expectation of material blessing in this life. In this he reflects the same faith as the apostles in Scripture who, in every case, were saved *into* hardships, discomfort and loss of material comfort.

The salvation story of Paul was typical of the experience of all the apostles. God radically encountered Paul with a blinding light that humbled him and caused him to need others to lead him around by the hand. And then God sent Ananias to pray for Paul, because God wanted to fill him with his Holy Spirit, heal him and *"show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my*

name.”(Acts 9:16)

What a curious thing! Whereas many prosperity preachers are luring people into the kingdom by promising them material comfort and wealth, God called Paul and immediately showed him how much he would suffer while fulfilling the calling God had for him!

Whereas the Health and Wealth Gospel appeals to the flesh and makes the Gospel about *your* comfort and blessing, the true Gospel message includes the exhortation to persevere in the face of many trials and much suffering, *“Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples and encouraging them to continue in the faith. “We must endure many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.”* (Acts 14:21-22)

It replaces God at the centre with Self at the centre

It is not that God does not want us to be blessed with health and wealth – He loves to do good to His children – but there is something He desires for us *even more* than material blessings. He wants to form our character. He wants us to unlearn our carnal tendency to self-love. The love of money and our preoccupation with health and creature-comforts is primarily rooted in self-love. True love is to love God and others more than we love ourselves. *“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”* (Romans 5:3-5)

This is why life on this earth for the Christian is often defined by sacrifice – for the cause of strengthening and caring for others. The true Gospel turns our carnal self-love outwards so that we can be liberated from our carnality and live for the glory of God. The Health and Wealth Gospel accommodates carnality, and actually weaves it into the heart of the message. It replaces God at the centre with Self at the centre!

I have encountered a few common arguments when I have tried using Scripture to reason with those who subscribe to the Health and Wealth Gospel, to which I have provided counter-arguments, which you can read in [Part 2](#).

Christian, Is It Well With Your Soul?

Horatio’s story of worship in the midst of anguish is both a challenge and a rich source of encouragement for every Christian. The peace that he discovered is a peace that you can also know.

Have you discovered that peace yet? Is it well with your soul?

If you have not yet found the sweet peace that comes from complete surrender, I encourage you to let go of trying to control your life and your destiny. Choose to trust in the goodness of God, even when you can’t see it. David famously sang, *“Even though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.”* (Psalm 23:4) There is a joy and a peace we can know that is not subject to our circumstances, because it comes from fellowship with Christ.

I want to challenge you: if you have been taught a false gospel that caused you to build upon a faulty foundation, as though godliness were a means to material gain, please recognise that teaching for what it is: False.

Christ *is* the treasure; He is not a means to another end.

Read [Part 2](#), where Luke responds to common arguments presented in defense of the Health & Wealth Gospel.