Philip Paul Bliss  
(1838-1876)

He was born in 1838 to Isaac and Lydia Doolittle Bliss in the backwoods near Rome, Pennsylvania in Clearfield County. Philipp, as his name was originally spelled, loved music but his father could only afford what he could make the boy, a flute that he carved from a stalk of cane.

When six years of age, Philip attended public school for a short time. He fell in love the teacher, Miss Murphy. She was very petite, had bright red hair, blue-green eyes and taught the class to memorize the twenty-third psalm.

One day when he was ten, the ragged and barefooted boy walked the dusty road into town from his rural log-cabin home to sell berries he had picked from the swamps. He was hoping to add to the few pennies that he already possessed to buy a cheap violin. When he reached town, he heard for the first time the beautiful sound from an instrument that his mother had described as a piano. He ventured to the house from which the sound came and shyly put his basket on the porch and silently stood at the open door, listening. When the lady of the house saw the uninvited visitor, she abruptly stopped playing. He stated, “O lady, play some more!” Not realizing the child’s real hunger for music, she ordered him away from the house by shouting, “Get out of here with your great big feet!”

At the age of eleven, young Bliss set out on his own to find work, carrying everything he owned tied up in a handkerchief. Exiting the front gate, he threw each of his remaining two siblings a penny. He found work on a farm, earning the huge sum of $9 a month. When twelve, he was baptized by a preacher from the Christian Church. At the age of fourteen, he was employed as a cook in a lumber-camp and one year later began to cut logs and later found work in a sawmill. During all this time he went to school when he could. Except for his brief time in public school, he had little education except that which he received from his mother. His reader had been the Bible. He had the rare privilege to spend the winter of his seventeenth year in school and did so well that the next year he himself taught a school. Also about this time, Philip enjoyed his first singing school, one taught by J. G. Towner. Towner recognized his talent and gave Philip
his first voice lessons. He later attended his first musical convention, in charge of the famous composer, William B. Bradbury. After this, he taught in the academy of Rome, Penn.

In 1858, at the age of twenty, he met Lucy J. Young and they married the year after. He joined the Presbyterian Church in Rome to be with her. He heard of the Normal Academy of Music at Geneseo, New York and longed to go to it but did not have the resources to do so. Lucy’s grandmother took her savings of $30 and gave it to Philip to send him to the academy. After finishing the Academy at Geneseo, he and Lucy moved to Chicago.

He wrote and published his first song, “Lora Vale,” and for the rest of his life he was constantly writing songs and giving concerts, and was very popular. With the encouragement of Dwight L. Moody and Major Daniel W. Whittle, he became an evangelist and was remarkably successful. He joined with Whittle for a series of evangelistic campaigns and for a time the Whittle/Bliss group was as famous as the Moody/Sankey group.

While in Chicago, he worked for Root and Cady Music Publishers, making more money than he had ever dreamed possible, even though he never copyrighted any of his songs. During the War Between the States, he was drafted into the Union Army, but it was so close to the end of the war that he never received orders to report to duty.

Bliss’ concerts and teaching opportunities kept him on the road a great deal but he attended local services wherever the train stopped long enough for him to visit a nearby church. One such Sunday evening he was waiting for a train to take him from Ohio to Chicago. He slipped into a church and took a back seat and heard the preacher, Mr. Brundage, reading from Acts 26:28, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” Brundage added, “He who is almost persuaded is almost saved, but to be almost saved is to be entirely lost.” Bliss was impressed by the thought and immediately set about to write the song so often used as an invitation hymn.
In 1876, he was asked to write the music for the poem by Horatio G. Spafford, “It Is Well with My Soul.” The poem is the culmination of thought from the grief suffered by the Spafford family just three years earlier. Bliss’ music offered the perfect music setting for the meaningful poem.

1876 had been a draining year for the Bliss family and they enjoyed the holidays with his family. But duty called so Philip and Lucy departed Pennsylvania, leaving their children with family in Rome, and caught the Pacific Express for Chicago on December 29th. The snow was blinding and the eleven coach train was already running three hours behind. The article in the next day’s paper says, “Shortly after 7 p.m., a train pulling out of Ashtabula, Ohio puffed its way across a trestle. Suddenly the passengers heard a terrible cracking sound. The trestle snapped and eleven rail cars plunged seventy feet down into a watery ravine. Even before the wooden cars slammed into the bottom, they were aflame, set afire by kerosene heaters. Of the 159 passengers in those cars, 92 were killed and most of the rest suffered serious injuries. Snuffed out by the wreck was a young couple whose bodies were never found.” To this day, this remains one of our nation’s most tragic train disasters.

Philip had actually survived the accident but crawled back into the flaming wreckage to rescue Lucy. Other survivors urged him not to go back but he said, “If I cannot save her, I will perish with her.” He was thirty-eight. Lucy was thirty-five. They had been married for seventeen years.

Philip’s trunk finally arrived in Chicago safely. In it were found the words to the last hymns he had written, one of which was:

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\begin{align*}
I \text{ will sing of my Redeemer,} \\
And His wondrous love to me; \\
On the cruel cross He suffered, \\
From the curse to set me free. \\
Sing, oh sing, of my Redeemer, \\
With His blood, He purchased me. \\
On the cross, He sealed my pardon, \\
Paid the debt, and made me free.
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