

THE STORY OF P.P. BLISS¹

(a Reader's Theatre presentation)

Speaker #1:

Born in the northern part of the state of Pennsylvania in the United States on July 9, 1838, Philip Paul Bliss had one thing in common with the famous American President Abraham Lincoln: Philip Bliss was also born in a log cabin.

He was ten years old before he heard the sound of a piano for the first time. He liked the music so much that when the young lady playing the piano stopped, He said, "*Oh lady, play it some more!*" Surprisingly, she rebuked him for his boldness. But the rebuke did not quench Bliss' love for music. Later in life P.P. Bliss would study under the well-known composers George F. Root and William Bradbury.

It was Bradbury who encouraged Bliss to establish himself as a music teacher. He followed that advice and became a music teacher when he was only twenty-two years old. He also began to write music. His very first original composition was titled, "Lora Vale", and it became a very popular musical ballad.

Having become a Christian though, Mr. Bliss went on to use his musical talents exclusively in the area of gospel music and hymn writing. What follows, are the stories behind the writing of some of P.P. Bliss' most well-known, well-loved hymns, that we sing and enjoy yet today.

Reader #2:

On a long wooden pew, Philip Bliss sat and listened intently as a special speaker, pastor Brundage preached from Acts chapter twenty-six, on the subject of the Apostle Paul appearing before King Agrippa. Pastor Brundage came to the verse where King Agrippa said to Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me to become a Christian." As he closed the sermon, Rev. Brundage pleaded with the people and said, "He who is almost persuaded is almost saved...but to be almost saved is to be completely lost!"

That phrase "almost persuaded" stuck in Bliss's mind, and he could hardly wait to pick up a piece of paper and pencil and sit down at the piano. The result of that verse of Scripture being laid on the heart of P.P. Bliss, is the convicting song "*Almost Persuaded*."

The awesome truth that is emphasized in that song is that the Holy Spirit does not strive with any person forever. The Holy Spirit is the one who "convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment to come," but the Bible nowhere promises conviction throughout our whole lifetime. When God's Spirit is speaking to us and dealing with our heart about getting saved, we must respond. There is no promise that we will get another call to come to Christ. People have hardened their hearts, only to never experience God's tender call again. In John chapter three Jesus taught that the wind blows where it wants to and that the Holy Spirit works and moves in a similar way.

¹ By Mike Edwards, Bible Baptist Church, Madison, Ohio, June 13, 1980 (revised 1993, Pt. Moresby, Papua New Guinea & Madison, Ohio, 2017). Adapted and taken from: *Hymn Stories for Programs* by Ernest K. Emurian. Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1963. Note: We interspersed the dramatic readings with instrumentalists or vocalists playing or singing some of the songs, with the entire congregation joining in to sing the last one.-mwe

Reader #3:

It was during a series of meetings being conducted by the famous evangelist Dwight L. Moody, that the inspiration for the next song was received. Mr. Bliss was directing the singing for Moody during a series of special meetings. At the close of one of the messages Moody told the story of the captain of a ship who was attempting to bring his craft safely into the harbor at Cleveland, Ohio on a dark, stormy night.

"The waves rolled like mountains, and there was not a star to be seen in the black, boiling sky overhead," Moody declared, as he painted the scene in the mind's eye. As the ship rocked in the violent waves the captain turned and peered through the darkness searching desperately for the lights that could guide him to safety. Finally, the captain spotted a large signal light from one tall lighthouse. He turned to his pilot and asked, "Are you sure this is Cleveland harbor?" "Quite sure sir," was the sober reply. "See the tall light?"

"Yes I do," said the captain, "But where are the lower lights to guide us into the harbor?" "Gone out sir," was the sad response. "Can you make the harbor?" the anxious captain asked his pilot. "We must sir, or perish," came the answer.

And so, with all of the skill he possessed, the pilot set out to guide the ship into Cleveland harbor. But despite a strong heart and a brave hand, in the darkness he missed the channel because of the lack of lower, guiding lights. With a horrible crash, the boat piled upon the rocks and settled slowly to a watery grave. Many died in the wreck, and those who lived, told the sad story of the lower lights having gone out.

As the congregation listened intently to the story, Moody concluded with this admonition: "Brethren, the Master, our Lord Jesus, will take care of the great lighthouse; but let us keep the lower lights, burning." The impact of that story compelled Philip Bliss to compose the familiar song, "*Let the Lower Lights Be Burning*." As you listen to the song, you can almost picture the vivid images of that fateful scene.

Reader #4:

The circumstances and reasons for the writing of hymns, even those of only one author, can be as varied as the man himself and his experiences. A far less dramatic reason for the writing of another well-loved hymn was the simple request of a Christian publisher, Fleming H. Revell of the Revell Publishing Company.

Mr. Revell was preparing to start up a new Christian magazine in Chicago during the middle of the 1800's. He decided that the title "Words of Life" would be an excellent name for this new publication. Mr. Revell then went to Bliss and asked him if he could write a gospel song to accompany that new magazine. The result of that request was a simple, delightful little song called, "Wonderful Words of Life."

Reader #5:

The ideas and inspiration for Bliss' songs, on more than one occasion, seemed to come almost as a result of Divine guidance-as though God had laid something directly on his heart.

Such an instance occurred one afternoon in the summer of 1875. Bliss was walking through the hallway of his home at 664 West Monroe Street, Chicago, when the words and music of "*The Light of the World is Jesus*" came into his mind quite suddenly. He sat down and the words seemed to flow without any effort whatsoever.

In the song, Bliss used a great deal of repetition to impress upon the singer as well as listener, the basic truth around which his words were written. The theme was the Lord Jesus, the living Word of Life. Like the great preacher Charles Spurgeon, Bliss seemed to "make a beeline for the cross", often writing about Jesus Christ and the cross of Calvary. Bliss knew with an assurance based on the solid Word of the living God, that sin, Satan, death, and hell were all conquered at the cross, by the mighty Son of God. Truly, the light of the world IS Jesus!

Reader #6:

P.P. Bliss did not just write songs for adults. In fact, a number of his songs were written for and became very popular among children and youth.

It was in Chicago, in June of 1870, while the Bliss family were guests of Major & Mrs. D.W. Whittle, that perhaps Bliss' most famous children's song came about. One morning Mrs. Bliss came downstairs to breakfast and greeted the others around the table with the announcement that "Last evening Mr. Bliss had a tune given to him that I think is going to live and be one the most used songs that he has ever written. I have been singing it all the morning myself and just cannot get it out of my mind!" The others around the table urged her to sing the song, and so she sang both the stanza and chorus of the new song for her hosts.

Bliss later explained that the idea for the song was suggested by the biblical truth that the peace and comfort of the Christian is not based upon his loving Christ, but rather upon Christ loving him! The apostle John declares in First John that, "we love Him because He first loved us." Scripture teaches that, were it not for God's gracious love towards the sinner, we would never come to Christ for salvation. Surely every truly born again child of God, no matter what his or her age, can with joy in their heart exclaim: "*I Am So Glad That Jesus Loves Me.*"

Reader #7:

The American Civil War was fought from 1861-1865 between the northern states and the southern states, over the issue of slavery. It was a time of terrible bloodshed and suffering for both sides. In some instances, brothers from the same family fought on opposite sides of the conflict.

It was during that war, in 1864, that General William T. Sherman encountered a very perilous situation during his infamous "march from Atlanta to the sea."

Sherman's army was camped near Atlanta, when the opposing forces of a General Hood, in a cleverly conceived tactical movement slipped around Sherman's right side and were able to cut him off from the rear-where the source of his supplies would come from. General Hood's forces immediately began destroying the railroad, burning ammunition dumps and destroying supply bases along the way. Sherman immediately began pursuing Hood's forces, to try and save his supplies in the rear, especially his large supply base at Altoona Pass in the Altoona mountains-through which ran the key strategic railroad that he needed to keep supplying his men.

A General Corse was stationed at that supply base with a small brigade of only 1500 men who were protecting more than one and a half million rations stored there. General Hood ordered a General French, to mobilize his 6000 men and destroy Sherman's supply base at Altoona Pass. Since the Union General Corse's troops were outnumbered four to one, Corse initially told his troops to surrender. But they refused his order, and instead began to fight, though greatly outnumbered. Intense fighting began. Gradually, Corse's smaller forces were being beaten down and finally were driven into a small fort on the top of the mountain. Just when defeat was staring Corse's troops in the face, one of his officers caught sight of a white signal flag being waved from the top of distant

Kennesaw Mountain, twenty miles away. They signaled back that they saw the flag. The exhausted troops then received this message, which was relayed from mountain top to mountain top to the desperate, greatly outnumbered men: "Hold the fort; I am coming. W.T. Sherman."

Under murderous rifle fire and fierce attack which continued for three hours, during which General Corse himself was killed and his Colonel badly wounded, the soldiers held the fort until General Sherman arrived and the attacking troops were finally forced to retreat.

It was this true story, that led P.P. Bliss to write his famous gospel song "*Hold the Fort*," with the chorus which has blessed so many hearts: "*Hold the fort for I am coming, Jesus signals still, Wave the Answer back to Heaven, By Thy grace we will.*"

Reader #8:

The year was 1876, and the song was perhaps the most famous one that Philip Paul Bliss would ever write. Seldom has a poet or composer done better in just eight measures of music, in describing the sorrow and anguish of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. The words of the verses build upon one another in telling the story of the voluntary sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ for the world. The fitting climax: "*Hallelujah, What a Savior!*"

Reader #9:

In 1873 a French luxury ship called the "S.S. Ville du Havre" left New York City, bound for England. Among the passengers on board was a Mrs. H.G. Spafford of Chicago, Illinois. She was the wife of another famous hymn writer of the time, H.G. Spafford. Mrs. Spafford, along with their four children were going on a long-awaited trip to the British Isles as well as the continent of Europe. Her husband had to remain back in the U.S. but planned to join them later.

The voyage was delightful, a welcome and long overdue holiday. The ship was several days out to sea sailing on quiet waters when suddenly and unexpectedly at two a.m. in the early morning of November 22, 1873, the Ville du Havre was accidentally rammed in the pitch black, predawn darkness by the British iron sailing vessel, "Lochearn." In a matter of two hours, the French ocean liner had sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean with the loss of 226 lives. Included among the casualties were the four Spafford children.

Nine days later, those who were rescued from the cold dark waters, such as Mrs. Spafford, arrived in the British Isles on board a rescue ship. She sent a telegram to her husband. It stated simply: "Saved alone." Mr. Spafford's response to the telegram was: "I'm so glad to trust God when it will cost me something."

As soon as possible, Mr. Spafford booked passage on another ship and was soon crossing the Atlantic Ocean to join his grief-stricken wife. During that voyage, in December of that same year, while the ship was enroute, the captain invited Mr. Spafford into his cabin and said, "Sir, I believe we are now passing over the place where the Ville du Havre went down."

That night, through his sorrows and sleeplessness, Mr. Spafford wrote down his thoughts, a song was born—that though he did not know it would bless hearts more than one hundred years afterwards.

Upon his return to Chicago the following year, Spafford took the words that he had penned, showed them to P.P. Bliss and asked him if he might be able to write some music to accompany the words—something Mr. Bliss was most happy to do.

In 1876 P.P. Bliss introduced that new hymn for the first time, singing it as a solo at a minister's conference attended by more than a thousand pastors. That song born out of a heart filled with sorrow, is called: "It Is Well with My Soul."

Reader #10:

Shortly after introducing "*It Is Well with My Soul*" to the public, Bliss took a few days off during the Christmas holidays to travel by train back to Buffalo, New York along with his wife and two children, to visit his mother. He planned to return to Chicago by New Year's Day, when a new series of evangelistic meetings was scheduled to begin. As New Year's Day drew closer Mr. & Mrs. Bliss decided to leave the children with grandma, while they would go on ahead and return to Chicago. Bliss and his wife boarded "The Pacific Express," the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railroad's pride and joy. The train's two engines were pulling 11 passenger cars that were packed with nearly 160 people when it pulled out of Erie, Pennsylvania in a driving snowstorm on the night of December 26, 1876.

At 7:30pm chief conductor Bernhardt Henn heard a blast from the whistle of "Socrates" the lead engine and thus knew they were rapidly approaching the 25-meter-high railroad bridge at Ashtabula, Ohio. What he did not know was that the train would never make it safely across that bridge! Approximately two-thirds of the way across the bridge the engineer saw the headlight of the booster engine "Columbia" flash skyward and then fall out of sight. As the so-called safe iron bridge crumbled beneath the added weight of the crowded passenger cars, fire broke out inside the train from the shattered stoves in the sleeping cars as they crashed to the earth below.

What the fire and river did not succeed in destroying, the scavengers from nearby squatter settlements personally took care of in the hours following the tragedy, robbing the dead and stealing from the wounded.

Final counts listed 92 known dead and 64 more seriously injured. Among the dead: Mr. & Mrs. Philip Paul Bliss. One survivor reported that he had seen Mr. Bliss crawling from the wreckage of one of the sleeping cars, only to look around for his wife, and not seeing her, turn back into the flaming car to seek to rescue her, dying there at her side.

In the providence of God, Mr. Bliss' luggage however had been checked on to Chicago on another train and arrived there safely. Several days later, several of P.P. Bliss' friends opened his suitcases. Among his personal belongings they found the words of a new poem which he had recently completed, and which contained some very stirring stanzas. A man whose public ministry had only lasted a brief 12 years, from the age of 26 to the age of 38, had left one final song to be remembered by.

James McGranahan, a Pennsylvania farm boy who had chosen song leading as a career, was selected to take the place of P.P. Bliss working as song leader and co-worker with Major Whittle, D.L. Moody and other great evangelists of that day. One of the first assignments given to McGranahan was to write some music to accompany the words of that final poem by P.P. Bliss. The song, "*I Will Sing of My Redeemer*," is a fitting tribute to one of the greatest songwriters the church has ever known.

Would you join me and turn to page _____ in your hymnbook: "*I Will Sing of My Redeemer*". The final song of a man greatly used by God: Philip Paul Bliss.