



PHILIP PAUL BLISS 1838-1876

Philip Paul Bliss, a Pennsylvania farm boy born in 1838, with little formal music training and minimal schooling, in the short span of twelve years gained wide popularity in Britain and America with his earliest gospel songs. His ministry began with an evangelistic meeting conducted by D. L. Moody in Wood's Museum Theatre in Chicago. In 1869, Bliss and his wife Lucy were out for a stroll before Sunday evening services when they heard Moody preaching from the steps of the courthouse, urging the crowd to follow him into the theatre for services. Bliss had heard of Mr. Moody but had never had the opportunity, before that evening, to listen personally to the evangelist. The music director was absent that evening and the singing was weak. But from his place in the congregation, the strong confident voice of Philip Bliss caught Moody's attention. Later as Moody greeted folks at the door, Bliss related, "As I came to him he had my name and history in about two minutes, and a promise that . . . I would come and help in the singing at the theater meetings." Moody asked some music publisher friends, "Where in the world have you kept such a man for four years that he hasn't become known in Chicago?" And so the relationship with Moody developed.

In 1876, Philip and Lucy traveled with evangelist Major D. W. Whittle for a week of eleven meetings in towns from Wisconsin to Michigan, finishing for the year in Peoria, on December 14. They returned to be with family for the holidays in Rome, Pennsylvania, agreeing to meet Whittle in Chicago December 31 and to sing at Moody's Tabernacle. The plan was to travel with Moody and Ira Sankey to Britain the next year, where Bliss's song, "Jesus Loves Even Me," had become instantly popular. Bliss had a natural sensitivity to common folks that inspired his gospel songs such as, "Hold the Fort," "Almost Persuaded," "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning," "Hallelujah! What a Saviour!" and the music to "It Is Well with My Soul," among many others.

Traveling by train, just after 7:00 the evening of December 29, 1876, Bliss was observed in the parlor car with work spread out in his lap, perhaps working on verses for "I've Passed the Cross of Calvary." The train plowed through the snow to approach a crossing trestle, about 100 yards from the station at Ashtabula, Ohio. A terrible cracking sound was heard. In seconds, the trestle fractured under the weight, and the train plunged 70 feet into a watery gulf, the wooden cars captured by flames fed by kerosene-heating stoves. The lead engine made it across, a second engine, two express cars and part of the baggage car rested with their weight upon the bridge while 11 cars fell in raging fire. Of 159 passengers, 92 were killed, including Philip Bliss and his Lucy, in the worst railroad tragedy to that point in American history. No trace of them was ever found, leading some to speculate that they were taken up in a "chariot of fire."

Philip Bliss had checked his trunk through to Chicago, and in it were songs surviving their 38 year old author that still minister to believers and unsaved alike.

"I will sing of my redeemer,
And His wondrous love to me;
On the cruel cross he suffered,
From the curse to set me free."

He was one of God's gifts to modern Christian music.