

Shipwrecked : or "Driven Up and Down in Adria."

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“And we being exceedingly tossed with a tempest”—Acts 27: 18

“All Thy waves and Thy billows are gone over me”—Ps 42: 7.

There are, no doubt, times when shipwreck not only threatens us, but becomes our experience. We believe this experience to be very real in some lives, but it takes many forms, and affects us in many ways. It may relate to health, or fortune, or reputation, or to our spiritual experience. It is a time when, to use the expressive phrase of our narrative (Acts 27) , we are “exceedingly tossed with a tempest.” And when neither “sun nor stars” in many days appear. We have the feeling of being baffled, forsaken, overwhelmed, often stunned. Whatever form the shipwreck may take it is always a supreme crisis in our life.

Shipwreck on the way to some desired haven

Often it happens on the way to some desired haven. Paul had earnestly desired to see Rome (Acts 19: 21; Rom 15: 23.24) , “Having a great desire these many years to come unto you,” is the language in which, on one occasion, he expressed that longing. And though he is not reaching his destination quite in the way he had intended or expected, he is, nevertheless, on his way thither. So with ourselves. The storm will often burst—the shipwreck will overtake us—just as we seem on the high road to a success, an achievement, or to a goal of some kind we hope to attain. Shipwreck does not necessarily mean complete disaster, irretrievable ruin, though it may mean the loss of certain things we hoped to have retained and perhaps thought indispensable. In Paul’s case there was the loss of the ship and all it contained, but of no man’s life. But there is gain as well as loss.

Shipwreck After Discipline

The shipwreck came to Paul after a long term of discipline in prison. For two years he had been detained at Caesarea. How varied the experiences through which he was called to pass! The quiet and seclusion of Caesarea stand out in bold relief from the commotion, excitement, and dangers of the storm at sea. But it was in the shipwreck that the discipline and experiences of prison life reached their climax. And such experiences were also a preparation for it. How often we are taken aside before some great crisis. How frequently there is the stillness before the storm; during which some message reaches us and by which we are fortified against all that is to follow. In prison it was that Paul received that Divine communication: “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.” Amidst the wild hurricane of the storm, as they were “driven up and down in Adria,” when “no small tempest lay on them,” and “all hope that they would be saved,” was taken away, these words must have often come to mind and strengthened the conviction that ultimate deliverance would be given.

Shipwreck at the End of our Career

Shipwreck may come towards the end of our career. Paul’s journeys and labours were almost over, his course was nearly run, his last witness was about to be borne, and Satan would, if possible, prevent the great Apostle of the Gentiles ever reaching the seat of the world’s

government, there to testify of the world's Saviour. In the whole course of our experience there may be troubles and difficulties, disappointments and set-backs of various kinds, but the shipwreck experience comes, perhaps, but once, and it is like no other. It is an accumulation of distresses, in the midst of which we need all our past experiences to help us, all our powers of navigation to enable us to keep afloat, all our courage and all our hope. We have to endure as seeing Him Who is invisible.

No One Exempt From Shipwreck

It may be noticed that though one of the greatest of saints, and most devoted of servants, and also an apostle, Paul was not exempted from this ordeal. We may be inclined to ask, Why did not God see fit to spare one who had served him so faithfully, so long, and so successfully, and who had already been through so much, and save him from this catastrophe? God meant Paul to reach Rome. From one point of view, He was sending him. Why did He not then provide the best and most comfortable means of transporting him thither? How different God's ways are from ours! Instead of doing what we might have expected the very opposite seems to have happened. Paul is allowed to go as a prisoner, and he seems to be the mere sport of circumstances. When he admonished those in charge and warned them that the voyage would be with "hurt and much damage," we read: "Nevertheless-the centurion believed the master and the owner of the ship, more than these things which were spoken by Paul." And so the ship is allowed to proceed according to the caprice of man, and the disasters predicted all follow as a consequence. "Why," we may ask again, "was this man, who on other occasions could work miracles, and who even presently was to work them, not allowed by the exercise of miraculous power to overrule the decision of the master or avert the storm? Nay, why did God permit the storm?" To fully discuss these questions would carry us too far, but this one thing stands out with perfect clearness, that it is not always part of God's ways to save His people (He did not save even an apostle), from the ordinary and natural consequences of either their own or other people's acts. His way seems rather to overrule ordinary conditions, and manifest Himself in them, either by sustaining grace or delivering power. Thus we gain a deeper knowledge of Him than would be the case if He spared us all trial and vicissitude. And this fact, while it does not do away with faith, necessitates ordinary foresight, and calls into exercise the various powers with which the Creator has endowed us. It is never right to say, "If a thing is going to happen, it will happen, and if it is not to be, it will not be." Such conclusions are false in every way—false to ourselves, false to God, false to the common experience of life. Paul gave the captain of the vessel and the centurion good advice, which, if they had followed, the consequent "hurt and much damage" would have been avoided. It was not taken, and this want of wisdom and foresight was soon brought home to everybody by some very hard facts. Another instance of the same kind is furnished by the narrative. Not only had Paul been told that he must be brought before Caesar, but it was added, "God hath given thee all them that sail with thee." And he tells the assembled company, "there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship." Yet when the shipmen were about to flee out of the ship, under colour as though they would have cast anchors, Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved. Then the soldiers cut off the ropes of the boat, and let her fall off." How far removed was Paul's mind from fatalism. He did not argue, I am to reach Rome, this is part of God's purpose, and the lives of all have been given me, and therefore I need take no account of anything, no matter what happens, it will be just the same. If these sailors leave the ship it does not matter. This was not his way of looking

at it. He was no doubt perfectly unshaken as to God's purpose, and perfectly convinced as to his promise, for had he not just declared publicly, "Sirs, be of good cheer; for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me." But this did not blind him to another side, viz., that there are matters which require our attention, and that we cannot afford to neglect them, for God uses means.

Shipwreck Through Others' Mistakes

May we not also learn in passing, that it is possible to be involved in shipwreck through the mistakes of others. In Paul's case it was not brought about by any misconduct of his, but because his wise counsel was not accepted. He appears helpless. Having proffered his advice he can do no more, and matters are allowed to take their course. Nor is it otherwise in our own case, sometimes. The shipwreck may not always be the direct result of our own actions. But whatever the cause, our consolation may be, that God can make all subserve the highest ends, and bring good out of evil. God's providence and purpose are seen in the end to go hand in hand.

Many Shipwrecks

Though we are not prepared to say that shipwreck (as here described) comes into every life, is it not a very real experience in the history of not a few? There are, undoubtedly, sheltered lives, with few struggles, and disturbed by few storms. With others, how different! and for the sake of any who have passed, or may be passing, through this experience, we would endeavour to set down some of its features. Often, it is preceded by a calm—"the south wind blew softly." We seem making headway, all seems propitious, the "desired haven" seems almost within sight, then the tempest bursts—Euroclydon is upon us in all its fury. We are driven before the wind, not knowing what the issue may be. We use the accustomed "helps," but they are unavailing. Some have known what it means to be confronted with a power against which they could not stand. Was not the psalmist in this plight when he uttered the cry: "When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then Thou knewest my path." All trace to us seems lost, but God knows the way that He takes, even though we may be driven before the winds and waves of circumstance, temptation, or doubt. Many of the expressions used in connection with this literal shipwreck, are equally descriptive of its spiritual counterpart. In what vivid language is the scene described: "We being exceedingly tossed with a tempest." "And when neither sun nor stars in many days appeared." "Driven up and down in Adria." There is danger from quicksands, rocks, and shoals. More than once something of this experience seems to have come to Jacob. No small tempest lay on him when compelled to flee from home and go as a stranger into a strange land. Nor was it otherwise on his return, years after, and he learned that Esau was coming to meet him, and with him four hundred men. And surely "sun and stars" did not appear for many days after the reported death of Joseph. Hezekiah in his sickness knew the meaning of shipwreck. Sun and stars are blotted out of his heavens, and he is "exceedingly tossed up and down." In his distress he cried:—"I shall not see the Lord, even the Lord, in the land of the living; I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world. ... I reckoned till morning, that, as a lion, so will He break all my bones; from day even to night wilt Thou make an end of me. Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter; I did mourn as a dove; mine eyes fail with looking upward: O Lord, I am oppressed;

undertake for me." Does the reader know anything of "being exceedingly tossed with a tempest?" You seem carried off your feet. The opposing elements are too much for you. There seem dangers on every hand. And in the midst of adverse winds and currents, when the powers against you seem overwhelming, and your frail barque seems "likely to founder, have you had to know in order that you may be fully tested, what it means for God's conscious support and presence to be withheld? He has not really left you, of course, but His comforts have ceased for the moment—sun and stars do not appear. And then, do you know the weariness of being "driven up and down in Adria?" Oh, the tiresomeness of it all! progress there seems none, you come back to the same point again and again, and are no nearer to your goal after all the tossing, and it seems as if from Adria there is to be no escape!

Shipwreck Teaches True Value

But all is not so aimless or useless as it seems. What are the lessons of the shipwreck? One surely is that we learn to estimate livings at their true value. We may suffer loss, but we discover that such things after all, are not the indispensable things. In the shipwreck which all along we have been using as our illustration many things had to go, but the lives of all were preserved. First, the tackling of the ship was cast out, then other things went overboard; even the wheat was cast into the sea, and lastly, the ship itself went to pieces. Yes, the use of the shipwreck is to lighten us, to enable us to lay aside every weight, to reveal to us what are the hindrances, to show us the true value of things. All this, of course, is in relation to the scene we are in, and the journey we are taking, and to the goal that is before us. As the apostle reminds us, "The time is short. And they that buy are to be as those that possessed not. And they that use this world as not abusing it" (1Cor7: 30-31). How much tackling and sail we carry that could be dispensed with—and better dispensed with—in the circumstances. They are a source of danger and inconvenience, considering the character we are called to bear before the world, and the path in which we are called to walk. That outward show which we prize so much, which ministers to our self-importance; the many things that we think to be useful and a help—are not these the tackling and the sails that the shipwreck deprives us of? And are we not immensely gainers in the highest sense by the loss? As the apostle puts it, "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ." How apt even Christians are to think that some gain is to be got out of worldly advantage, and we are prone to carry all the tackling and sail available. And truly it all looks very fine when there is no Euroclydon about, but when the storm comes, how much of it has to go by the board! Yet what is essential remains—the life remains; and the life is more than meat, and the body more than raiment. And we come to see that God is supremely occupied with what we are—the life—and not with what we have. "There shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship." "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

Shipwreck Gains

But there are other gains. To Paul it is said, "And, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee." Just as life is of supreme importance, in the first instance (for a man cannot bless others beyond the blessing he has himself received), so it is the lives of others that we are to seek. Apart from the shipwreck, Paul could never have had this supreme honour—that of being the means of the salvation of all on board. He could not have felt the same concern

about these people had their lives not been in jeopardy. And we have no doubt that this result—this salvation— though only temporal—was granted in response to his prayers. Perhaps these people never realised they owed their preservation to Paul's presence and to his prayers, anymore than the world realises to-day what it owes to the fact of God's people being in it and to their prayers. If eternity reveals all relating to this great war that is just concluded, it will probably be found that prayer availed more than many people think to stem the tide of the enemies' assault and ultimately to end it.

Shipwreck Shows His Care

Once more. Does not the shipwreck bear witness to God's preserving care and overruling providence, as well as to His method of working? He did not see fit to give His servant a pleasant journey to Rome, but He did stand by him, and He gave him wonderful words of comfort to speak to all on board. Could there be anything more sublime than the picture of that solitary figure in the storm, undismayed, and with words of cheer for everyone? It gives us to see the reason why shipwrecks are allowed—we learn in them all that God can be to us, and all that He can enable us to do and to bear. Paul is able to say to these distressed voyagers, "There shall not an hair fall from the head of any of you." And these words came true. We marvel sometimes at all that is allowed to happen. Does the opposite ever fill us with wonder; viz., what we are spared?

How God Can Fill a Man and Use him

And, then, lastly, as we watch through the shipwreck this noble figure of Paul, do we not become conscious of the gain? We see how God can fill a man and use him. When all hope is gone, and the ship is ready to founder, we see Paul standing forth in the midst, serene, and still master of the situation. What words he is enabled to speak! "There stood by me this night, the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve." We see him as one who receives direct communications from God; and then shortly after we see him under another aspect—he puts himself in touch with men, beseeching them to take meat, and setting them the example, giving "thanks to God in the presence of them all." "Then were they all of good cheer." It may not be our lot to go through a shipwreck (metaphorically speaking) in this calm, confident spirit, feeling ourselves master of the situation; and things may happen which we do not care to remember. In the rough and tumble of a shipwreck—to be in a place "where two seas meet"—is not a condition in which one can always manifest great composure, or be very confident as to the issue—but it is the place where we learn our own impotence and nothingness, and, moreover, that God has not forgotten us. It is also true, "So He bringeth them unto their desired haven." If these experiences belong to any of us at the present time—if "no small tempest lies on us," and much that we valued is disappearing overboard—or if we are experiencing the monotony of being "driven up and down in Adria"—the seeming sport of winds and waves and without progress—let us not forget that Paul did eventually reach Rome, and that on the way, he heard the voice of God amid the storm. And, if there is the same trust and confidence on our part, what God was to him, He will be to us. And the ultimate gain? a richer spiritual experience, and a truer estimate of what is really of value, with the consciousness that that which is highest and best remains, and is more our own than ever.