
Ministry Address

Shipwreck -- The Last Third of the Book of Acts

August 3, 2014

Introductory Reading -- Acts 27:41

Acts 27:41

Falling into a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground, and the prow having stuck itself fast remained unmoved, but the stern was broken by the force of the waves.

The book of Acts in its latter end is a book of shipwreck. The physical shipwreck of chapter 27, where the ship is wrecked on the shore of Malta, gives a character to the whole last third of Acts. The Lord is coming soon. It seems fitting that there should be those in this world who understand how the shipwreck happened -- not to wring their hands and say everything is ruined, but to understand the nature of the ruin, so as to honor the name of the Lord Jesus with something in their hearts that answers to what is due to Him.

The One Place: Deuteronomy 12 and the Nazarite Vow

Deuteronomy 12:11, 13-14; Numbers 6:13-15

Then there shall be a place which Jehovah your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there; thither shall ye bring all that I command you... Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest: but in the place which Jehovah shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou

shalt do all that I command thee.

For Judaism, there was one place in all the world where the sacrifices and burnt offerings were to be brought. David found that place -- it was Jerusalem. The Nazarite vow illustrates the principle well. Under the Nazarite law (Numbers 6), a man who had made the vow of a Nazirite could not complete it without going to that one place. If he was defiled by contact with a dead body, he had to shave his head, then walk to Jerusalem and offer the prescribed sacrifices. He could not offer them at home. There was one geographical place, and he had to go to it.

Shipwreck No. 1: The Nazarite Offering in Jerusalem -- Acts 21

Acts 21:17-26

And they said to him, Thou seest, brother, how many myriads there are of the Jews who have believed, and all are zealous of the law... This do therefore that we say to thee: we have four men who have a vow. Take these, and be purified with them, and pay their expenses, that they may have their heads shaved... Then Paul, taking the men on the next day, having been purified, entered with them into the temple, signifying the time the days of the purification would be fulfilled, until the offering was offered for every one of them.

The glad tidings of Christianity is this: the work is done. Not 'do' but 'done.' The Lord Jesus said upon the cross: 'It is finished.' There remains no more sacrifice for sins after the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. His work was a once-for-all offering, complete, perfect, and unrepeatable. And then -- in Acts 21 -- the Apostle Paul entered the temple in Jerusalem with four men, waiting for the offering to be offered for every one of them. 'Until the offering was offered for every one of them.' That is not the cross. That is a making light of the cross.

The man who did it was not some peripheral figure -- some member of the mixed multitude who had tagged along for the journey. It was the Apostle Paul: the very

man through whom we have received the doctrines of the once-for-all work of Christ, the foundation and backbone of what it means to be a faithful and godly Christian. And he is the one who fell. That is what makes it properly called shipwreck.

Shipwreck No. 2: I Am a Jew -- I Am a Roman -- I Am a Pharisee

Acts 22:3; 22:27; 23:6

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia... Then the chief captain came and said unto him, Tell me, art thou a Roman? He said, Yea... But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee.

In the days following Paul's arrival at Jerusalem, he had opportunity after opportunity to speak publicly to large audiences. On the steps of the castle, to the assembled multitude -- his last public preaching in Jerusalem, for all he knew. To the Roman chief captain who might release him or have him scourged. To the council of Sadducees and Pharisees. Three opportunities. Three confessions.

At Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. That is the name. It was not at Antioch that the Apostle Paul said to a great crowd at Jerusalem: 'I am a Jew.' It was not at Antioch that he said to the Roman commander: 'I am a Roman.' It was not at Antioch that he told the council: 'I am a Pharisee.' He said all three of those things, in each case because there was a possible advantage -- the Jews might listen if he identified with them, the Romans might not scourge him if he claimed citizenship, and the council might be split if he played the resurrection card against the Sadducees. But what he did not say, when he had the opportunity to say it, was: I am a Christian. The absence of the confession of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ is called, with sorrow, shipwreck.

Shipwreck No. 3: Refusing the Leading of the Holy Spirit -- Acts 21

Acts 21:4, 12-14

And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit that he should not go up to Jerusalem... When we heard these things, both we and they of that place besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done.

Here is a case where the Apostle Paul said one thing and the Holy Spirit said something directly contrary. The disciples at Tyre said to Paul through the Spirit that he should not go up to Jerusalem. The prophet Agabus bound his own hands and feet with Paul's girdle and declared what awaited Paul there. Those who traveled with Paul, and the believers at each stop, all begged him not to go. He would not be persuaded. He went.

Refusal of obedience to the leading of God the Holy Spirit has a name. That name is shipwreck. It is the same word.

Shipwreck No. 4: Paul's Spirit and Jerusalem as Center -- Acts 19

Acts 19:21

When these things were fulfilled, Paul purposed in his spirit to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, After I have been there, I must see Rome also.

The King James Version and Darby's translation agree that the lowercase 's' is correct here. It was not the Holy Spirit. Paul purposed in his own spirit to go to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was somehow still in his mind as a center -- the place where Peter and John and the other apostles were, the place he had to get to before he could turn round and go out to the Gentiles again.

This illuminates why, when there was no small disturbance about the way at Ephesus -- when Demetrius the silversmith stirred up the whole city in defense of the goddess Diana -- the Apostle Paul was of no help. He did not go into the theater. Not this time. It was a Jewish man, Alexander, who bore the heat and opposition. Paul, whose heart was already half-turned toward Jerusalem, had no power at Ephesus that day.

The answer to Demetrius and Diana was not far away. The Lord Jesus had said: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' There is no headquarters temple anywhere. There is no geographical center. The Lord has chosen for His own a moral and spiritual center: gathered in the power of the Holy Spirit around Himself in the midst. Paul had a vow to complete? The Lord Jesus was in the midst of His assembly at Corinth. That was the one place. Paul should not have turned his back on the Gentiles to go to Jerusalem.

The Character of the Shipwreck

What constituted the shipwreck of the last third of Acts can be summarized in four things, all of which are connected. A making light of the once-for-all death of Christ on the cross, by going back to the offerings of Judaism. An absence of the confession of the name of the Lord Jesus when every opportunity was present to make it. A refusal to obey the leading of God the Holy Spirit. And a persistent notion that Jerusalem was somehow a center -- a more important place than the place where the Lord Jesus Christ is in the midst of even two or three gathered in His name.

The man who did all these things was not a peripheral figure. He was the Apostle Paul. That is what makes it sobering, and that is why it is fitting, with the coming of the Lord so near, to understand what these things were and call them by their right name.

Restoration: Not Almost but Altogether Such as I Am -- Acts 26

Acts 26:28-29

Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day were both almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.

The shipwreck was a true shipwreck. All those things happened. But the Apostle Paul came out the other side. Here, before King Agrippa, he said it: I am such as I am. What am I? Agrippa had just used the word Christian, and Paul's reply was: I would to God that all who hear me today should become such as I also am. He is a Christian. He said so. He said it clearly, in the presence of the king, pressing on thick the fact that if he could have it his way, every one there would be such as he is -- a Christian, in bonds for the name of the Lord Jesus.

He was restored. He was taken to Rome in chains and he wrote the great prison epistles -- Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. He wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, with its great theme of the once-for-all work of Christ upon the cross. And he confessed the name of the Lord Jesus in everything that he wrote. He did not write those epistles with unjudged sin upon his heart, or with something wrong about him that would leak into his words. The shipwreck was real, and the recovery was real. May grace and wisdom preserve us from the one, and if we have fallen, may the same grace bring us back to the other.

* * *

Lord willing.