

The Titanic

Disaster

AND THE SPIRIT
OF THE MASTER



A Sermon delivered by Byron H. Stauffer in
Bond Street Congregational Church, Toronto,
Sunday Morning, April 21st, 1912

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Three passages of Scripture have been a comfort during this awful week, trying to our patience, to our emotions, and even to our religious faith.

The first is from the ninth Chapter of Ecclesiastes:

“All things come alike to all: There is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not; as is the good so is the sinner; there is one event unto all; time and chance happeneth to them all.”

The second is from the well-known Psalm:

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

The third is from the Master Himself:

“Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee, or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.’”

Out of the maze of false despatches and vague rumors, reports of bestial selfishness, of slaying, of mutiny, there has at last come to us from the deep, one of the most sublime annals of the human race, touching our hearts with unspeakable sorrow, it is true, but arousing our grandest and deepest emotions, thrilling us with admiration for men's heroism, and filling us with an unselfish pride that we, too, belong to the brotherhood of man.

A leviathan was on the deep. A great ship, with centuries of science welded into her steel garments, was making her maiden voyage. On board were more than two thousand souls. It was a representative company, typical of our race and age. Literary princes, military experts, captains of industry, representatives of earth's richest families, women with jewels unrivalled in an Arabian Nights' dream, were in apartments as elegant as the palaces of kings. The cargo represented the value of many Spanish galleons, and the written communications carried in the mail bags equalled the correspondence of a whole mediaeval century.

Was the great ship racing for a prize of record? Her owners, it is asserted, were striving to cast a notable tribute at the feet of the twentieth century god, Speed. Men of affairs

must reach their destination on time. Business engagements have been made in advance. Close connections are planned with limited trains. Seats in the play-house, or even a table in a café, have been reserved by a wireless for the night of arrival.

So the floating hostelry was hurrying on. Two thousand miles of sea had been cleared, the remaining thousand was but a holiday cruise. Land seemed near, for the news of the world was being snatched as it floated over the face of the deep, and messages of the voyagers' progress were being despatched to friends on shore as easily as a telegram is sent to Toronto from a nearby junction point.

The Sabbath was passed, and the evening was being spent as taste and discrimination prompted. Some lingered late at the dinner table; others at the card table. Some exercised in the gymnasium; others read in the library. Some listened to music or joined in the singing of familiar hymns; some had retired to rest.

A sudden quiver passed through the length of the vessel as if the giant shivered with a chill. Many did not notice it, a few were alarmed, but reassured. In the smoking room the card players felt a shock, and looking through the window saw a huge iceberg passing close to the ship. The game went on, un-

conscious of the winning game that death was playing against them. There could be no danger. The officer said so, and the travelers, already prepared to boast that they had crossed on the first trip of the unsinkable Titanic, believed him.

“All passengers on deck with life-belts on!” Could it be that they were in peril after all? No, it was merely a wise precaution the grizzled old captain was taking. What! Are they actually uncovering the life-boats? Yes, the crews were curling up the ropes that were to lower them by the pulley-blocks. Even then few believed that the riveted side of the ship had been ripped open and that she was sinking.

“All men stand back; all ladies to the next deck below!” Every man obeyed. Every wife did not obey, some refusing to have aught but death itself part them from the men unto whom they had plighted their faith. Others were urged into the boats by husbands who confidently promised to meet them in New York. The men remained, standing as still as if they were in a church service, so the surviving officer informs us. Brave man of wealth, brave railroad president, brave man of the cottage, all worthy of England, America and Canada.

The life-boats glided away into the darkness. Looking back, the occupants almost regretted

having left their floating home, for there it stood in a sheen of light as if holding merry festival. The band was playing, as if the vessel were going into battle, or as if a conqueror were passing. Aye, play on, for a thousand conquerors are passing. The crew still obeyed orders. The captain was still on the bridge. But the prow was surely sinking. Soon the watchers saw the bow submerge; the stern arose toward the sky, the captain was hurled from the bridge. The lights went out in unison. But even in darkness the musicians are still playing:

“ Nearer My God to Thee,
Nearer to Thee!
E'en though it be a cross
That raiseth me,
Still all my song shall be,
Nearer My God to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.”

Then a roar, such as a wounded Behemoth might have given in his death agony, told of the crash of mighty engines, and the Titanic, latest marvel of the seafaring world, glided into the sea, launched for her swift passage to the valleys of the deep.

One of the hundreds of those afloat amid the wreckage is recognized by his fellow. It is Phillips, the hero of the Marconi button. He is

dead, but he has done his work; his message lives! For, after three awful hours have passed, the survivors see their salvation nigh. Lights are yonder in the southeast. A ship approaches. Willing hands soon lift up the exhausted ones. The Good Samaritan of Jesus has many brothers on the Carpathia.

II.

Let us go back to the port from which the good ship sailed, to quaint Southampton, on old England's coast. It is Sunday evening, last Sunday evening. In a church the wives and children of seamen are singing:

“ Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep:
O hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea.”

And their thoughts go out across the dark waters to the Titanic. Yon woman and little maid join heartily; they are praying for husband and father. Ah, poor-founded trust! By Tuesday, the woman is a widow, and the little maiden in her weeping thinks of the Sabbath evening hymn, and she cries: “O! Mother, we will never sing it again, for God didn't hear

when we cried to Him for our father in peril on the sea.”

What answer shall we make unto the maiden, for I must try to satisfy her, even though my faith falters with hers.

I shall say first, that while God promises to care for the souls of men, to bring them into their desired haven, He does not promise to bring every living physical body across the sea to earthly harbours, even though we pray to Him to do so. And I shall comfort the maiden by saying, that in the saving of some and the loss of others, there is neither reward nor punishment, none whatever. “All things come alike to all; to the righteous and to the wicked.” It is downright foolish and wicked to tell people that if they only have faith, sufficient and persistent, their prayer will be answered with mathematical exactness. The day will come when the people to whom we lay down these narrow rules, if they think at all, will surely be dis-illusioned, and then, losing faith in our foolish theory, they are in danger also of losing faith in our God.

Here is another woman, and she rejoices to-day. We will say that her husband went abroad, and she has been praying for his safe return. He was booked on the Titanic. He forgot his coat in a London hotel; went back

for it, missed the train and thereby the boat. To-day he sends words that he is still in England. Her friends says, "How providential!" That sounds well, but follow it out to its logical conclusion, speak of it in the presence of women whose husbands did not lose their overcoats and did not miss the Titanic, and it becomes selfish presumption, that is all. Not every praying Hebrew was saved from his fiery furnace. Not every Peter was able to walk upon the water, even for a moment. Not every Paul brought all the crew to land. Some Stephens are stoned; some John the Baptists die. But grace surrounds them; the Almighty hands holds them, nevertheless.

We make some providences ourselves. We avoid dangers by taking forethought. We save lives by prudent precautions. Good old Doctor Wild used to say: "Everything that happens need not have happened." Formerly when a whole family died of black diphtheria or scarlet fever, we said that it pleased God in His wise providence to take them. Now we look into the open well, or the city reservoir, into the milk bottle or the defective plumbing to see whether it was not, instead, the carelessness of man that took them.

If boats dash along amid icebergs at twenty knots an hour, all the sailors' hymns ever sung

will not avail.

There is a Providence in the rough, a wholesale Providence as it were, giving us our atmosphere, our seasons, our rail, and our harvests. As ages come and go, this Providence manifests in additional and timely blessings. A crowded continent is given swifter modes of conveyance to more sparsely-settled shores. The depleting of forests is followed by the uncovering of coal beds. When the potash beds of Germany prove insufficient we find potash in California. Our very enemies have become our friends. Bludgeons change into surgeons' knives; poisons into sustaining medicines; raging elements into harnessed messengers. The Marconi wireless telegraphy has helped to answer the sailors' hymn. Were it not for that latter-day blessing those life-boat survivors must have perished in that refrigerator of the sea. Within ten years that invention, perfected and extended, may save the whole crew of another Titanic and answer another maiden's prayer. So she will still join in the hymn. Our very helplessness cries unto Him who sometimes seems to require lives as a vicarious atonement, not sacrificed to assuage His wrath, but made to secure the renewed vigilance of men against the raging elements.

III.

This awful disaster reminds us of our limitations. We know that we were born to rule the universe. David boasted the boast of our race when he addressed his God: "Thou madest man to have dominion; Thou has put all things under his feet." We are surely moving toward that goal, but once in a while the elements still rebel and cry, "Not yet, not yet." We have thought ourselves masters of the sea; marine men have boasted that we are as safe in the great liners as we are at home. And it is true that we are at least as secure as we would be on a street car or railway train. Here is the Titanic, one-sixth of a mile long, as wide as the auditorium of this church, capable of holding 3,000 passengers and a crew of 850. Some had even declared such ships to be unsinkable. What a commentary on our helplessness that this marvel of engineering skill with her elevators, her palm gardens, her library, her magnificent suites, should go down on her maiden voyage, her starboard side ripped from stem to engine room as if laid open by a gigantic can opener. Byron, if alive, could write again without the change of a word:

“ Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain.
Man marks the earth with ruin, his control
Stops with the shore. Upon the water plain
The wrecks are all thy deed; nor doth remain
A shadow of man’s ravage, save his own,
When, for a moment, like a drop of rain,
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling
groan,
Without a grave, unknelled, uncoffined and
unknown.”

We must realize our limitations in speed. The railroad has had to learn it and those eighteen-hour trains between New York and Chicago have been put back to twenty hours. The auto must learn it as we have sad cause to notice every now and then. Individual men must learn it in curbing their activities in the interests of a longer life.

Was the Titanic working for a record? All testimony would so indicate. If so, the people are to blame as well as the company. Men choose the fastest route; they are willing to pay an excess fare to gain an hour in a thousand-mile railroad journey. And what is a hundred dollars to a rich man if he can reach London a day sooner? This demand for speed the companies have tried to satisfy, until, this time, the price is sixteen hundred precious lives. Now the engagement in New York can wait forever!

Our modern conceit has made us reckless. The Titanic was warned by passing ships, and yet she rushed through the icefield at twenty-one knots an hour. We overlook the matters of sufficient life-boats, trustworthy ropes, life preservers, and of fire escapes in public buildings. May we have even the bitter consolation that these lives will secure greater safety in the future.

IV.

But, let us turn to the comfort of the catastrophe. Our race is a great brotherhood. The disaster arouses pride, not shame. On Thursday night some of us, having heard all manner of sensational rumors could not sleep. False reports told of foreigners rushing boats and crushing women, of shooting, rapine and mutiny. We were ashamed of our race. When we opened our morning papers we almost rejoiced. The boat had gone down with bands playing and the captain on the bridge; practically all the women had been saved; even the emigrant from southern Europe had stood restrained, or had fallen on his knees in prayer. Nearly every detail showed that old England and her national daughters, Canada and the United States, are still fit to be mistresses of the sea.

The democracy of death and suffering brought all together. At noon the steerage and the cabin were separated by privileges of luxury and wealth; at midnight all distinction vanished and steerage peasant and saloon prince came together. A company of men whose aggregate wealth would reach half a billion elbowed in their helplessness with groups from the humblest walks of life. The bejewelled wife of the "landlord of New York" and the poorly clad haus-frau of the Balkan serf were in the same open boat above two thousand fathoms of merciless sea. And the husbands of those wives stood bravely at the same rail while upon them both death came apace.

No money could help. In New York City the wife of a mining king offered to pay for a whole fleet if it would rush to the rescue of her husband, but the fortunes of the world were helpless. The president of a great railway belting our nation, with regiments of officials under him, was as feeble as the poorest stowaway. It all prompts us to cry in the words of Abraham Lincoln's favorite poem:

O, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?
Like a swift-fleeting meteor, a fast-flying cloud;
A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave,
Man passes from life to his rest in the grave.

'Tis the wink of an eye; 'tis the draught of a
breath,
From the blossom of health to the paleness of
death;
From the gilded saloon to the bier and the
shroud—
O, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?

But there is mercy on the ocean after all. If we are inclined to criticise the sacrifice of safety to the demand of selfish luxury and the speed of commercialism, let us turn from the Titanic to the Carpathia. She hears the call, changes her course and steams for the spot, as the Titanic, let us remember, also would have done. Commerce waits upon humanity. Captain Rostron takes a justifiable risk now; a double shift of stokers cram the furnaces. Extra lookout scan the sea. English, Italian and Hungarian doctors prepare for every emergency. Soup, coffee and tea will soon steam on the tables. Every officers' cabin is prepared for the sufferers. The fifty-eight miles are made through icefields in three hours and a half, and the survivors are soon on their way to New York. Nor is the religious element lacking. A solemn service of prayer and thanksgiving is followed by the burial service at which thirty brides know not that the prayers for the mourners are said in their behalf.

V.

But, my friends, if God seemed absent out on the deep on Sunday night, Christ was present in the harbour on Thursday night. The Master rejoiced with joy unspeakable and full of glory. He was there on the deck to see this twentieth century triumph of His love.

What did He see?

He saw a great metropolis respond to the touch of His pitying hand.

He saw a company of white-robed nurses, of skilful physicians, of orderlies with stretchers, blankets and ambulances, all ready for the sufferers.

He saw two hundred suits of underwear, coats, trousers, dresses and footwear waiting for the half naked.

He saw \$20,000 in cash, to be distributed among the penniless.

He saw the wives of the rich preparing their horseless chariots to carry away the weary.

He saw the poor women of the steerage helped into limousines by their newly-found sisters of wealth and carried away to homes of luxury.

“Come, ye blessed of my Father,” cries the rejoicing Master, “Come and inherit the King-

dom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was an hungered, thirsty, a stranger, naked, and sick, and ye gave me meat, drink, clothes, beds.”

“O, Master,” cry the astonished owners of money, chariots, talents, provisions and pity, “O, Master, when saw we Thee an hungered and fed Thee? When saw we Thee a stranger and took Thee in? Or naked and clothed Thee?”

And the Master shall answer, “Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”

The whole Christian world can sing to-day as never before:

“Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

“We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.”

