

The Christian Life as Likened to an Ocean Voyage

There are three things which are too wonderful for me. Yes, four which I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the midst of the sea. (Proverbs 30:18-19)

I love ships! Always have. Always will. I was born in the ship-building town of Barrow-in-Furness on the north-west coast of England, where the most advanced British submarines, other warships and some of the classiest-ever ocean liners were built. I grew up about seventy miles south of Barrow in the city of Liverpool – a large, deep-water port on the tidal River Mersey.

As a boy, I spent much of my summer holidays ship-spotting in both Barrow and Liverpool. Some relatives on my Dad's side of the family were officers in the Royal Navy. Some on my Mum's side were engineers, riveters and welders in the Vickers-Armstrong shipyard in Barrow. In my early teen years, I was keen to adopt a career in the Royal Navy; but God steered me in another direction.

Just what *is* a ship? Dictionaries tell us that, in simple terms, a ship is a large hollow vessel that floats upon water. Technically, a ship is usually larger than a boat. The difference, as I was told as a boy, is that a ship can carry a boat, but a boat cannot carry a ship.

Thus, the cruise liners that Trish and I have sailed on are, of course, ships – huge ships which can and do carry boats – boats such as lifeboats and tenders. Tenders are quite large motor launches that transport passengers to and from ports which are too small for the huge cruise ships to dock at.

Even vessels as large as conventional submarines may be classed as boats, because they can be carried by larger ships called “submarine service vessels.”

What is a ship's purpose? The answer to this question depends upon the type of ship. Here are a few examples:

- The unique purpose of Noah's Ark – as ordered by God Himself – was to maintain the continuance of air-breathing animals and man.
- The purpose of fishing boats is to catch lots of poor, unsuspecting fish, usually for food. We read of fishing boats in quite a few places in the gospel accounts. It seems that, like Trish and me, Jesus and His disciples enjoyed being out on the water.
- The purpose of a warship is to wage war from the sea on one's enemy. There will be no warships in the World Tomorrow. Any warships left over from the war-mongering World Today will, according to Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3, be refitted for some peaceful and beneficial purpose – perhaps converted to big fishing vessels. Imagine how many fish the 97,000 ton USS Abraham Lincoln (the world's largest warship) could hold?
- The purpose of passenger liners and ferries is to transport people (and sometimes automobiles) from one water-side city, country or continent to another.
- The purpose of a cargo ship (sometimes referred to as a freighter) is to transport food, timber, oil and other useful (and useless) products from one water-side place to another.
- The purpose of a cruise ship is to entertain and thoroughly spoil its decadent, hedonistic passengers on-board, and to transport them in an excessively luxurious manner to exotic ports-of-call. The Royal Caribbean Line's huge new sister ships *Allure of the Seas* and *Oasis of the Seas* both weigh in at more than 225,000 tons each, making the USS Abraham Lincoln look like a toy tug-boat!

In this article, let us examine the Christian life as likened to an ocean voyage on board a big ship.

Embarkation

Perhaps the most exciting period of a sea journey is the day of embarkation. First, we arrive at the ship. Wow! Look how big it is! We have lots of questions: What will the cruise be like? What will the ship be like? What will our cabin be like? Will the seas be rough or smooth? What will the crew and service be like? Will it meet our expectations? Will it be worth the money?

Shortly after we have had fun doing our mandatory lifeboat drill, experienced crew members slip the moorings, and the ship eases away from its berth, and begins its voyage.

For some second generation Christians, their “embarkation” into their experience of the Christian life takes place at birth or in early childhood.

But for many or even most of God’s people, our embarkation took place at our conversion and baptism. Our pre-conversion years were spent “docked in a port,” unknowingly awaiting the beginning of this exciting “voyage” into a very different way of life – God’s way of life.

At our baptism, we were plunged into the water – something like a ship being launched, except that – unlike a ship – we go right under the water and pop back up and out again.

Way back then, at the beginning of our individual voyages, did we really know what we were committing ourselves to?

Jesus says that we should have counted the cost before embarking onto the journey of His way of life. However, He didn’t use nautical terminology when He spoke of this. He used agricultural and building terminology:

And Jesus said unto him, “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

And whosoever does not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sits not down first, and counts the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him. (Luke 14:27-19)

But again, way back then, at the beginning of our individual voyages, did any of us *really* know what the cost would be? Did any of us *really* know what our upcoming voyage would be like? More on this question as we continue.

Mid-course Corrections

Although we usually think of Passover as a memorial of our initial calling, conversion and baptism, it and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are often a time of reflection of the past year and all our former years since our initial “embarkation” into God’s way of life.

Now my days are swifter than a runner; they flee away, they see no good. They pass by like swift ships. (Job 9:25-26)

Ships are much swifter today than they were in Job’s lifetime. The fastest cruise ship is the Queen Mary II which has a top speed of 33 knots (38 mph). But a small French destroyer named “Le Terrible” clocked 45 knots (52 mph) way back in 1935.

How swiftly our human lives fly by! Yes, even the lives of the people of God’s true church! Can you believe that we are actually in the year 2011?

How far have we come since our embarkation into God’s way of life? How are we doing? Are we still on the right course? Or have we deviated from the course set for us by our Captain? Have we deviated at all from the faith once delivered (Jude 1:3)? Is some mid-course correction required? One nautically-related example of this might be in the use of our tongues:

For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body... Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. (James 3:2, 4-5)

Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (which will be upon us before we know it!) are also times of mid-course correction. Does not God tell us in the weeks leading up to Passover each year through the apostle Paul that we must examine ourselves?

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. (I Corinthians 11:28-29)

Of course, self-examination and mid-course corrections should not be limited to the days preceding Passover. They should be a year-round exercise. But what if we examine ourselves at any time, see something amiss, but don't do anything about it? What if we fail to correct it? Yes, what then?

But be you doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholds himself, and goes his way, and straightway forgets what manner of man he was. But whoso looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. (James 1:22-25)

This would be like the captain of a huge ship recognizing the fact that he or his navigators had allowed his ship to stray off course, but failing to rectify it. Disaster could result! The ship could go aground, or hit some rocks or another ship. Shipwreck!

This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. (I Timothy 1:18-20)

If we wish to avoid spiritual shipwreck, God advises us through Paul, that we must make these mid-course corrections by keeping the faith and by maintaining a good conscience.

A ship leaves its home port and strikes a course for its first port of call. On our modern ships, much of the navigational work is shared between human navigators, on-board computers and navigational satellites. But reasons might arise which cause the ship's captain and his human navigators to overrule the wonderful electronic technology. The safety of his passengers and crew is a captain's number-one priority and if a life-threatening storm is detected along the planned route, a course correction will be taken.

How like our Christian journey! Didn't we all count the cost according to the advice of Jesus Christ and the minister who baptized us? Didn't we all start out with a certain concept of how our Christian life would unfold? But how many of our Christian lives turned out the way we thought they would? Not many! Not *any*, I would say!

How many of us foresaw the huge personal trials and family tragedies that God allowed us to go through? How many of us foresaw the apostasy that arose in God's church? How many of us foresaw the subsequent scattering of the brethren?

Perhaps we didn't foresee these things. But what did we do when they did come to pass? Did we, as some have done, heedlessly sail on – on our same initial bearing – a direction that would have brought us to spiritual disaster?

No, we did not. Guided by the Captain of our salvation, we made mid-course corrections – some of them major ones – and, although we are somewhat storm-damaged, our journey continues – yes, even though it is sometimes through rough waters.

Here are the English translations of “A Calm Sea” and “A Prosperous Voyage” – two short poems by the German poet and novelist, Johann Wolfgang Goethe who lived from 1749 to 1832. The works combined were made even more famous in musical settings by Beethoven, Mendelssohn and, more recently, Bruno Walter.

**Deepest calm lies on the water,
Motionless the idle sea.
Anxiously the sailor scans the glassy surface all around.
No breeze stirs in any quarter!
Deathly calm, arousing dread!
In that vast immobile ocean, not one ripple moves.**

**The mists start to scatter,
The sky grows bright,
And Aeolus loosens the knot of our fears.
The zephyr winds are now whispering,
The sailor now stirs.
Swiftly! Swiftly!
The waters are parting,
The distance draws nearer,
Land is in sight!**

Today, because we sail on ships with huge, powerful engines, a calm sea is most preferable to us. It is very nice – most comfortable. But as illustrated by these two poems, in former days – in those days of sailing ships – a calm sea meant there was no wind. And no wind was a very bad circumstance. Sailing ships were totally dependant upon the wind – *any* wind from *any* direction – for them to make any progress on their voyage.

From the point of view of a sailing ship’s crew, a wind from the rear was most preferable. This allowed them to sail in a straight line towards their destination. Wind from the ship’s sides were their secondary preference. Even wind from the front (head wind) was better than no wind at all. Side or head winds required more effort and maneuvering. The sailors used a maneuver called “tacking” which sailed the ship from side to side using the side winds or head winds in order to reach their destination – but by the “long-way around.”

In our Christian voyage, a “no-wind” situation might symbolize no resistance, no problems, trials or difficulties. This, like a calm sea, might at first sound very nice? But is it really? It really is not. A Christian voyage lacking trials is not ultimately good for any of us. Like a lack of exercise (if you will excuse my mixing of metaphors), a lack of trials will atrophy our spiritual muscles. We will become spiritually flabby, sloppy, lazy and sickly. Trials that come upon a Christian may be likened to strong winds from the front or the sides of a sailing ship.

Trials, like strong winds, can be used to our advantage. But if we do not use them wisely, they can break us:

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is in her palaces; He is known as her refuge. For behold, the kings assembled, they passed by together. They saw it, and so they marveled; they were troubled, they hastened away. Fear took hold of them there, and pain, as of a woman in birth pangs, as when you broke the ships of Tarshish with an east wind. (Psalm 48:1-7)

God does not want us to be broken, of course. Used properly however, trials can force us to “tack” back and forth in order to get to our destination the “long way around” (something like the second-generation Israelites in the wilderness). The winds of trial force us to take frequent mid-course corrections. They force us to exercise spiritually. Thus they can make us spiritually stronger.

But then, on occasion – or hopefully, even more frequently – God might bless us with great encouragement, which may be likened to a good, strong wind from the rear of the sailing ship – and will help speed us on our way to our final destination.

Final Destination: Fair Haven

What is our final destination? What is our fair haven?

The world's churches, of course, believe that a Christian's final destination – the distant harbour – is in heaven. We know better. For many of God's people, their human life's voyage is already over. Even though the life-voyages of our deceased brethren are complete, they have yet to attain their reward:

And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. (Hebrews 11:39-40)

The dead in Christ must wait – unconsciously, of course. But what are they waiting for? For their Captain's return. But they must also wait for *us* – for their brothers and sisters to complete *our* life-voyages and to catch up with them!

They have yet to be ushered into the harbour of their final destination – their fair haven. As ships ride at anchor outside the harbour while awaiting their dock assignment from the harbour-master's office, our deceased brethren are now at rest temporarily – just passively and unconsciously awaiting the return of their Captain, so that He – like a Coast Guard or a tugboat captain – may enable the completion of their journey – to guide them into the harbour of their final destination.

But for you and me, we still have some way to go. The remaining length of time depends upon our age, the time of our death, and the timing of our Captain's return.

Many ocean cruises are one-way voyages. They begin at one port and end at another. Many Alaska cruises and virtually all Transatlantic cruises are one-way. Others are round-trip cruises in which the final destination is the same port as the one the ship started from. God forbid that this should be the case in our Christian voyage. God forbid that we should end up right back where we started!

Although the return of Jesus Christ and the First Resurrection will signal the end of our *human* journey, the Millennium (as symbolized by the Feast of Tabernacles) is *not* our final destination. Yes, it is a major port-of-call on the way to our final home-port; but, as symbolized by the Last Great Day, the Kingdom of God – the eternity beyond the Millennium will be our final destination.

So there you have it... The Christian life portrayed as an ocean voyage on a big ship. How fast the time of a pleasurable ocean voyage can fly by! Similarly, how fast the voyages of our Christian lives have flown by!

As the passengers make the most of their remaining precious hours of their enjoyable time together, let us – more importantly – make the most of the remaining years of the voyage of our Christian lives!

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