

## **SUNDAY MORNING NO. 151**

### **PAUL'S SHIPWRECK**

It might not appear, at first sight, that there is anything particularly edifying to be derived from the account of Paul's shipwreck, which has been read this morning. We may find the fact different from the appearance when we look into it. It has to be remarked first that this is one of those sort of chapters which could not have been written except from the circumstance of its being true. It is a plain account of incidents of travel, such as there could be no object in narrating, except on the score of their having happened. Every surrounding circumstance confirms the fact of its truthfulness. It has been in the hands of the Christian community ever since there were Christians upon earth.

There have been communities in the earth professing faith in Christ ever since the second half of the first century; and during all that time, they have had the Acts of the Apostles in their hands, containing this account of Paul's journey to Rome by sea. It was the most natural thing in the world that such an account should be written. It relates to a leading man among them at the beginning—the man who had most to do with their beginning: the man who was God's instrument in establishing them in the first case, —a man who laboured and travelled much, well-known among all the brethren, and the object of personal affection to many of them: a man who at last sealed his life's work, at Rome, by giving his head to the executioner there at Caesar's command, on behalf of the testimony he had delivered. It was inevitable that the first Christians should want to know the history of such a man. There were men who knew about that history; and it was most natural that they should write what they knew. There were many who did write accounts to gratify this most natural and most profitable curiosity. But none of them have survived, except those embraced in the New Testament, and these have survived because they received the consent and approbation of the apostles and elders of the first generation of believers. And this consent is a guarantee of reliability to us, because in the first age, the Holy Spirit was with them, to guide them in their decisions, as Jesus had promised. Even if it were not an inspired composition, its value would be absolute for the purpose this morning, as the account of personal facts, by men who knew, and whose probity is established by the nature of the enterprise they had in hand (*viz.*, turning men to righteousness), and placed beyond all doubt by the fact that they submitted to persecution and death for a work which brought them no advantage unless it were a true one.

Here, then, we have a ship sailing from Caesarea, on the Syrian sea-board, and touching at various points on the eastern Mediterranean, and finally caught in a storm which buffets her for days, and hurls her a wreck into a creek in the island of Malta. On board this ship is a Roman centurion with soldiers. How came he there? He was there by the orders of his superiors at Caesarea. What was his business? He was *en route* for Rome. On what errand? With prisoners. Now, among his prisoners was one in particular, to whom the centurion showed himself specially courteous. This was Paul. On what charge was he in custody? Accused of what, was he on his way to Rome? To this we have a very special official answer; and it is this answer that brings to light the immense storehouse of edification not at first visible in the chapter.

Festus, the Procurator of Judea, who was forwarding his prisoner from Caesarea to Rome, had a difficulty about the charge-sheet in the case. When he came into office as the successor of Felix, he found Paul in custody, and he was applied to very importunately by the Jews to have judgment against this Paul, who, however, possessing the status of a Roman citizen, could not be given up to judgment without a proper hearing and satisfactory evidence against him. Festus could not give up a Roman citizen to judgment without a well-founded and definite charge; and having no knowledge of the charge against this prisoner, he

appointed a special hearing, without, however, any very satisfactory result. The Jews, at the special hearing, had enough to say against him, but nothing of the sort that Festus expected to be brought against a prisoner in custody.

*“Against whom,”* said he, afterwards, to King Agrippa, in open court, at another special hearing, *“when the accusers stood up, they brought none accusation of such things as I supposed; but had certain questions against him of their own superstition, and of one Jesus which was dead, WHOM PAUL AFFIRMED TO BE ALIVE.”* (Acts 25:19.)

Now, we know, as a matter of fact, from other sources, that this was the matter at issue, and the cause of offence between Paul and his Jewish accusers. The Jews had crucified Jesus; the disciples of Jesus afterwards testified to the fact of his resurrection, to the chagrin and intense displeasure of the rulers who had compassed his death. These rulers strove by might and main to gag the apostolic testimony. This Paul was, at the first, their willing servant, and while in the height of his activity in this direction, he suddenly stopped being a persecutor, and became himself a proclaimer of the fact of Christ’s resurrection. He went here and he went there, with all the energy he had previously shown against Christ, affirming, as Festus said, that Jesus, who was dead, was now alive.

*“For these causes,”* said he to Agrippa, *“the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me.”*

The question to consider here is, the ground on which Paul joined in this testimony to Christ’s resurrection. He states the ground in his address before Agrippa. His address was prefaced by introductory remarks by Festus, that bring out Paul’s remarks into very distinct relief. Paul, having been brought into court, Festus, addressing the court, said,

*“King Agrippa, and all men who are here present with us, ye see this man (I wish we could: we shall by-and-bye), about whom all the multitude of the Jews have dealt with me, both at Jerusalem and also here (Caesarea), crying out that he ought not to live any longer. But when I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death, and that he himself hath appealed to Augustus, I have determined to send him, of whom I have no certain thing to write unto my lord. Wherefore, I have brought him forth before you, and specially before thee, O King Agrippa, that, after examination had, I might have something to write.”*

Paul, invited by King Agrippa, then addresses the court. He began by referring to his education among the Jews, at Jerusalem, and his entire concurrence at the first, in their opposition to Jesus, of Nazareth. Then he described his own ardent participation in their measures of persecution, in the course of which, while engaged on a journey to Damascus, Jesus of Nazareth himself presented himself before him in blinding glory. There could be no mistake about it. The occurrence was surrounded by every circumstance that could make any occurrence certain. It happened in the open air, in the brightness of noonday. It took place in the presence of witnesses—namely, the company of officials who were accompanying him on his mission. These witnesses saw and heard what transpired. They were all physically affected by it, though none of them so much so as Paul. They were thrown to the ground, Paul himself was struck blind, and had afterwards to be led by the hand into Damascus. No circumstances could more effectually guarantee the actuality of the event, or more entirely exclude the possibility of deception or hallucination. There was publicity and tangibility. As Paul said to Agrippa,

*“This thing was not done in a corner as thou very well knowest.”*

This is so far as regards the outward aspect of the occurrence. When we look at the heart of it as regards the words spoken to Paul on the occasion, Paul’s justification is

complete in the overpowering evidence of the correctness of his testimony. From the midst of the glory, a voice addressed him,

*“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.”*

As much as to say, “You are only hurting yourself in fighting against facts and truth.” But who was the speaker? This was Paul’s question—the inevitable question under the circumstances:

*“Who art thou, Lord?”*

Paul recognised the Lordship of one who could appear to him thus, but had no idea he was persecuting such a lord. He knew Jesus of Nazareth; he designedly persecuted him; but he had no idea that he was alive. He knew that he had been crucified—probably witnessed the event—and saw in the fact of his crucifixion sufficient evidence of his non-Messiahship and sufficient reason to labour in the suppression of a movement connected with his name, which, he imagined in his ignorance, was directed against Moses and the God of Moses. He persecuted none other than the disciples of a dead pretender, as he supposed; but here was a personage in glory accusing him of persecuting him. His question, therefore, was most natural,

*“Who art thou, Lord?”*

And the answer, what volumes it contained:

*“I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest.”*

What a revelation to Paul. The words were brief, but sufficient. The sight of his eyes and the hearing of his ears convinced him that he was on the wrong track altogether. It was specially confounding that the revelation should be made to him on an actual journey of persecution, and just as he was nearing the city which was to witness his supremest effort as a persecutor.

What was the next thought natural to such an embarrassing situation but the one Paul expressed:

*“Lord, what wouldst thou have me to do?”*

As much as to say, “Here I am in the very act of persecuting the resurrected Messiah of the God of Israel, whom I imagined in my darkness to be a deceiver in his grave. I am dismayed utterly at the discovery. What shall I do? Shall I go back to Jerusalem? Shall I go forward to Damascus? Shall I disband the officers who are with me; what shall I do?” It did not beseem the dignity of the Lord of glory to answer the question in the practical way that was called for. It was sufficient to direct Paul to a source of information.

*“Go into Damascus, and there it shall be told thee what thou must do.”*

Before leaving him, however, the Lord explained to him the reason of his appearance thus to him.

*“Rise, stand upon thy feet, for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose to make thee a minister and a witness both of those things which thou hast seen, and of those things in which I will appear unto thee, delivering thee from the people (the Jews) and from the Gentiles, to whom now I send thee to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and inheritance among them, which are sanctified by the faith that is in me.”*

And the interview ends, and Paul is led blind into Damascus; and here he receives the promised information. He had not to seek for it. To whom could he have applied? The Jews could tell him nothing, and the Christians would have been frightened to have any dealings with him, knowing he had arrived as their enemy. The Lord had prepared the information. He appeared to a leading brother, named Ananias, and ordered him to go to the house of Judas, in the street called Straight, and enquire for Saul of Tarsus. Ananias was astounded at the idea.

*“Lord,” said he, “I have heard by many of this man how much evil he hath done to Thy servants at Jerusalem, and here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on Thy name.”*

What was the answer to this most natural demur?

*“Go thy way, for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel, for I will show **him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake!**”*

(Extraordinary proposal! In human schemes it is always some benefit that is held out.) Ananias, thus entirely disarmed, went his way; found Saul; ascertained all that had happened; cured him of his blindness, and baptised him.

Now what follows, for us, from this whole recital? Why, that if Paul saw Christ on the road to Damascus, Christ lives now, Christ will come again at the appointed time, the dead will be raised, as He has declared; the kingdom established; and salvation gloriously manifested in all the earth in accordance with the covenants which from the beginning have assured the blessing of all the families of the earth in Abraham and his seed. It means, therefore, that we have now a glorious hope in the midst of the darkness: a hope founded on facts; not built on plausibilities; in no way resting on speculation; depending in no degree on man’s incompetent theorisings on the nature, origin, and destiny of the universe; having nothing to do with philosophy, though in harmony with the highest efforts of the philosophic faculty. It is as Peter, who was an eye-witness, said,

*“We have not followed cunningly-devised fables.”*

No, they are words of demonstrated truth and soberness, that will at last yield well-being and glory beyond the highest imagination of man to conceive.

Dear brethren and sisters, let us be brave and consistent in the case. Deciding that Paul’s testimony is a true one, let us recognise that it is worthy of all the enthusiastic appreciation and service which it is in our power to yield. Let us not parley with it and dally with it as if it were a matter of doubtful and unimportant opinion. If it is not true, it is a pernicious fable to be scouted and indignantly hurled into the limbo of human superstitions. If it is true, it calls for nothing less than all the consecrated and energetic endeavour which Paul himself threw into its service during a life-time of nearly forty years, in which he hath left us an example which Christ Himself has set us to copy.

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