

THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 10 October 2004 6:30pm

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1 John 5 v 1-21

Have you ever said something that you later came to regret, or realised that you spoke too soon. I think that most of us, to a greater or lesser degree have opened our mouths and proceeded to plant our feet firmly inside.

Now whilst I was researching this evenings talk I came across what would prove to be one of the classic 'spoke to soon' quotes of all time. I would like to think that the gentleman lived to regret his comment, but he didn't for. The quote was made by one Edward J Smith in 1907.

'When anyone asks me how I can best describe my experience in nearly forty years at sea, I merely say uneventful. Of course there have been winter gales, and storms, and fog and the like. But in all my experience, I have never been in any accident... of any sort worth speaking about. I have seen, but one vessel in distress in all my years at sea. I never saw a wreck, and never have been wrecked, nor was I ever in any predicament that threatened to end in disaster of any sort.'

Edward J Smith was the Captain of the Titanic.

Now the more I look at the story of that ill fated ship, The Titanic, the more I feel that I could preach a whole sermon from it.

It was on April 15th 1912 that the Titanic sank, 1523 people died, and a legend was born. A lot of things have been said about the Titanic, at least three films have been made to my knowledge, one of which was the blockbuster of a few years ago.

Many people have talked about the arrogance of the Titanic's owners and there is a story that they claimed it to be unsinkable. Actually the claim was 'practically unsinkable', but close enough.

The arrogance of thinking that the ship was 'practically unsinkable led the owners to overlook basic safety features. There were not enough lifeboats for all the passengers and crew. There were 2228 people on board the ship when it sank, but only 20 lifeboats which could hold a maximum of 1178 people. Almost half the people on board did not have a place on a lifeboat if they needed one.

And the lookouts, those responsible for checking for icebergs did not have binoculars.

On the day of her sinking the Titanic received seven warnings about icebergs, six were ignored by the captain, and one did not even make it to the bridge.

The berg that the ship hit was a so called black or blue berg which is an iceberg that because of melting, and a change in the centre of gravity has turned upside down in the sea and has clear ice above the water, not the normal white snowy thing we see on the TV. This sort of berg is virtually impossible to see at night especially with no binoculars. At 11.40 pm the iceberg was sighted, 37 seconds later the ship crashed into it.

Now the ship was claimed to be practically unsinkable because it was split into 16

compartments each having a bulkhead separating it from the next. The idea was that if the ship hit an iceberg and one of the compartments flooded then there was enough air in the rest of the compartments to keep the ship afloat.

The trust that the owners put in these bulkheads was too great. They had not put watertight caps on the top. So when the ship hit the iceberg the first compartment flooded as expected. The water then burst over the top into the next compartment which then filled up, and then burst into the third compartment etc etc. The design was meant to keep the ship afloat in just such a situation. However in reality from the moment the ship hit the iceberg it was doomed to sink. The design made it impossible to stay afloat.

Now the bible teaches us that we are flawed, we are not as our designer designed us. He designed us to be perfect, but we knowingly go against His wishes and become imperfect. And the bible tells us that there is no going back, in our own strength.

Just as the Titanic was doomed to sink from the moment the iceberg hit, so too are we doomed to death and eternal separation from God from the moment we first do wrong. Unless we get help.

Number 7 lifeboat was launched at 12.45 am with 28 people aboard. It had a capacity of 65. Most of the lifeboats left only partially full. One only had 12 people aboard and had a capacity for 40. However panic was limited. The unwritten law of 'women and children first' was kept to even though one of the officers stood guard and threatened to shoot any man who tried to climb into a lifeboat before the women and children had gone. He never had to shoot anyone.

At 2.18am the ship split into two, and the stern rose vertically, just as it did in the film, and then sunk. The Titanic was not to be seen again for 73 years.

Out of the 2228 people aboard the ship only approx 705 survived. The Titanic's sinking left many people afloat in the water, and many others aboard lifeboats. Some recall seeing a mystery ship in the distance. It was real, and was called the Californian. It could have saved many lives, if the radio operator had not gone to sleep and turned his radio off.

Now there people from many walks of life aboard The Titanic on that fateful cruise. There were the super rich in their first class parlour suites with their own private promenade which cost in today's terms about £39,000 for the trip, through ordinary first, and second class to third class which cost less than £100 for the trip in today's money.

But no matter who they were. Whether they were rich or poor, whether they were from aristocratic or common backgrounds. Whether they were passengers or crew, men or women didn't matter as the ship sunk below the waves. Only one thing filled the minds of those who were still alive
'am I going to be saved.'

Now you don't have to be clinging to a piece of wreckage, or sitting in a lifeboat in the middle of the North Atlantic to have asked that question. If we are completely honest with ourselves then most if not all of us here this evening have had at least small doubts about our status with God, especially if we have done something that we consider majorly wrong. Has God accepted us, will He forgive what I've done, can He forgive me?

Verse 13 of this evenings passage says

'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life'.

This is the purpose of this evenings passage, in fact it is the purpose of the entire letter that John wrote, so that we may know that we have eternal life.

Now the bible contains many sharp warnings about what I can only call spiritual complacency where we let things slide. But is it possible for a person who is a professing Christian to fall so far away from God that he becomes hopelessly lost once again?

2 Peter 2 v 20-21

'If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and again are entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it, and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed to them.'

Passages such as this warn against a superficial faith. But passages like the following one from Hebrews seem to say that if a Christian loses his faith then he is lost forever. In other words you can lose your Salvation.

Hebrews 6 v 4-6

'It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God, and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace.'

So from this passage we can glean that *if* a saved person ever comes to the point of repudiating his faith he becomes irrevocably lost. He has lost his faith and in turn loses his eternal life. However that is a big if.

There remains the legitimate question as to whether such a person was ever really saved in the first place. 1 John 2 v 19 seems to suggest not.

'They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.'

So in effect John is saying that there are different sorts of people within a church. People who come to church for various reasons. Not all of these are because they are believers.

This is logical, I wasn't a believer when I first started coming to this chapel. Me and a friend came because we were invited by two girls. Other people come to chapel because they are naturally religious, and I say religious rather than Christian. Others feel that there is something missing from their lives, and are searching for whatever it is. And I am not knocking any of these.

So a fellowship like here at Therfield is a mish-mash of different peoples from different backgrounds all coming to chapel for different reasons. Therefore it is logical that some of

those who are not really believers will leave the fellowship eventually if they decide that Christianity isn't for them.

I have known many people, some who have been good friends, who have left the chapel because they never really were believers in the first place. They haven't joined another church, but just left. We of course have to be careful that we are not judgemental here, as God doesn't require more than a tiny piece of faith in order to save people. He wants to save them, He doesn't put barriers up that people have to climb over in order to be saved.

The classic picture, in the bible, of one who was part of the group, but fell away was Judas Iscariot. As we studied the Gospel of Matthew in the morning services I began to wonder why Judas did what he did. And the only answer I could come up with was that he had a false impression of who Jesus was. In Judas's head the Messiah or Christ was a conquering hero who would rid Israel of the hated Romans. In Judas's head this did not include dieing on the cross. So Judas betrayed whom he thought was a false Messiah, one who had raised his hopes, but dashed them later. But it was Judas who had the false idea about Jesus.

Let us look at these things logically. How can a saved person become unsaved? If I were to walk into a road in front of a car and someone see that I am about to be run over. And if they were to dive out and push me out of the way of the car, then they would have saved me from being run over. If however I end up being run over by another car going the other way then they haven't saved me. They may have made a valiant attempt, but I wasn't saved.

If Jesus' death and Resurrection saved me from the consequences of my sin, but I then end up in hell then I can't have been saved in the first place or I would be in heaven. Jesus would have made a valiant attempt, but He would have failed.

Another way to look at it is to remember that the New Testament makes it clear that when we are saved we have eternal life. John 3 v 36

'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life'

Can't be any clearer than that, it does exactly what it says on the tin. So if I become a Christian I acquire eternal life. However if I were to subsequently go away from the faith how could I lose my eternal life. If I could lose eternal life, then it wasn't eternal in the first place. The only way I could end up not having eternal life is not to have been a believer, and not to have been given it in the first place.

Logic dictates that if we have gained Salvation under the terms the bible tells us then we cannot lose that Salvation, it is assured. The essential thing then is to make sure that we understand what the bible means by Salvation, and make sure that we have done what we have to do in order to get it.

And what do we need to do in order to be saved? Verse 1 of this evenings passage.

'Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves His child as well.'

Salvation is accomplished through simple belief in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Belief not being just a mental assent to the facts. The devil himself knows that Jesus is the

Son of God. Demons recognised Jesus whilst He was on Earth. However they didn't put their trust in Jesus, they didn't have their faith in Jesus, and this is what we must do in order to be 'born again' as the Gospels say.

Salvation does not come through our actions, but on our faith in Christ's actions. Coming to church doesn't therefore make us a Christian any more than visiting a library doesn't make us a book. We can go to church for 50 years, become a Member, become a Deacon, become a Minister, but if we haven't put our faith in Jesus then we will not be saved, eternal life is not ours, and we will not go to heaven.

But if we have made that step of faith, even if we never become a Member of the church, never become a Deacon, never become a Minister, never the less we will be saved, will have eternal life, will go to heaven. What we do, our actions do not effect this either way.

In this last chapter of 1 John, John gives us a number of characteristics of true saving faith. The first one is what we have just covered. We need a Christ centred faith. If we put anything else, and I mean anything else in Christ's place then we are in trouble. This even includes the church or this chapel in our case. It may come as a surprise to you, but Therfield Chapel cannot save you from your sins. It may point you to the Saviour, and it ought to, and when you have accepted Him it may help you in your Christian life, again it ought to, but the chapel, and all of us here have no power to save anyone from the consequence of the sins. Only Jesus can do that.

For that matter neither can Buddha, Mohammed, or even Tony Blair. It is a lie to think that all religions are but different routes to God. Jesus Himself said that He was the only route to the Father, the only route. If He was telling the truth then all other religions are false. It is no good being nice and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. We are not doing Muslims, Hindu's etc any favours by not telling them. Indeed we are consigning them to hell. If we love our Hindu and Muslim brothers and sisters then we have to say the truth, for their sakes.

The second characteristic of true saving faith is love. We know that God loved us because he sent His Son the Lord Jesus to die in our place, to take the punishment for our sins. We know that Jesus loved us because he was willing to do this for us. And in verse 2 John puts love for God, and love for our fellow believers together.

'This is how we know that we love the children of God, by loving God and carrying out His commands.'

John is saying that if we love God, which is shown by whether we keep Gods commands or not, then we will love our fellow believers.

In His gospel John writes in chapter 15 v 12

'My command is this; love each other as I have loved you.'

We sung about this earlier in number one in Mission Praise. Love for each other is the gauge by which we can judge whether our faith is on track. It is not speaking in tongues, it is not the second blessing, but love for each other. This is what really counts. A lack of love for each other may indicate a lack of love for God.

The third characteristic of true saving faith is keeping Gods commands. Verse 3 says

‘This is love for God: to obey His commands’

And he goes on to say that these commands are not burdensome. There is a string going through this passage that you can follow if you look closely. John first of all says that we are saved through faith in Christ. A sign of that faith in our lives is that we will love others, in particular our fellow believers. Another sign is that we will obey God's commands.

Now it is very important to have this obey section here together with the love section. For example someone might say the following

‘it is not loving to tell homosexuals that it is sinful to engage in homosexual behaviour. The bible says to love others and not to judge; therefore you shouldn't condemn homosexuality as sin.’

But that ignores other biblical statements that show that God condemns homosexual behaviour as sin. God doesn't condemn homosexuals any more than He condemns thieves or adulterers, but He does condemn behaviour, homosexuality, stealing and adultery. All these things are the result of man's disobedience. All these things are forgivable.

However love does not mean being tolerant of wrong. Love does not refuse to confront what is wrong. As Christians we have to have a commandment keeping faith, one that shows the love of God.

In this passage John lists three tests to help us judge our spiritual position with God. We have looked at the first two. The first one was the Lordship test. Is Jesus the Lord of our lives? In the Christian there is the desire to do God's will, even if we fail sometimes. The person who couldn't care less about what God thinks, though, isn't saved. If we want to do the Lord's will, if we are distraught when we fail, then we are believers, we are saved.

The second test is the fellowship test. Do we have a genuine love for our fellow Christians? I am not talking about sexual love, but do we really care about them, mentally, physically, and spiritually. If we do then that is a sign that we are on the right road. Of course we may fail them. Because we are not perfect, and don't always see things as they are. However not caring is a sign of not having the Holy Spirit

The final test is the relationship test. Verses 11-12

‘And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.’

Salvation is not about us giving some sort of mental assent to a distant God who is never close to us. Salvation is all about a relationship with the God who is in us. It is not so much about an experience you had in the past rather than the ongoing experience you have with Christ today.

The question is less ‘did you believe in Jesus?’ than ‘are you believing in Jesus, do you have a relationship with Him right now?’ The Holy Spirit isn't like a light bulb. You can't flick a switch and He disappears from our life. The bible is clear that when you become a believer the Holy Spirit comes and lives in you. He can do this even though He is God, and God cannot look upon sin. This is because when we ask Jesus into our lives we have our

sins forgiven. And the Holy Spirit can stay with us all the time because we have all our sins forgiven, even those we haven't committed when we first become believers.

This is a tremendous assurance for us all. There have been times when I was certain one moment, and doubting the next. Times when I have asked God to save me many times each day because I didn't feel saved. However our salvation is not dependent on our feelings. It isn't dependent on our actions. It isn't dependent on whether we go to church or not, whether we have been Christened, baptised, take Holy Communion, or any of these things.

My parting suggestion to you all is to take these three tests of John. If you can say yes to the Lordship test, have you asked Jesus into your life? -answer -yes, then you are saved, no ifs, buts or maybes. You do have eternal life, you will go to heaven. That is the testimony of the bible and of logic.

If you can say yes to the fellowship test, do you love your fellow Christians?, and yes to the relationship test, do you have an ongoing relationship with God? Then you are well on the right track. God can use you, and He will.

Let us close now by thanking God for this 'blessed assurance.'

Song number 59 'Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.'

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