

Keeping a Straight Course.

The Isles of Scilly are an archipelago off the south western tip of the English county of Cornwall. One of the islands of Scilly, St Agnes, is the most southerly point in both England and the United Kingdom. The Isles have the dubious distinction of being the location of frequent shipwrecks, and among these was one of the greatest disasters in British naval history.

In the year 1707 on September 29, Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell led his fleet of twenty-one ships out of Gibraltar to return to England. His flagship was the HMS *Association*.

Clouds and gales, rain and squalls beset the ships as they journeyed north to England. When the fleet sailed out upon the open Atlantic, passing the Bay of Biscay, the weather deteriorated even further and the storms pushed the ships off their course. Nevertheless, by November 2, 1707¹ the ships reached the mouth of the English Channel.

Admiral Shovell's officers believed that they were on the last leg of their journey. They believed the fleet was sailing safely west of Ushant, an island that lay off the coast of Brittany. However, because of a combination of the bad weather and the mariners' inability accurately to calculate their longitude, the fleet was off course and closing in on the Isles of Scilly instead. Before they could correct their mistake, the fleet struck rocks and four ships were lost.

The exact number of officers, sailors and marines killed in the sinking of the four ships is unknown. Some say 1,400. Others say there were over 2,000. Regardless of the exact number it was one of the greatest maritime disasters in British history. For days afterwards, bodies continued to wash onto the

¹ By the modern calendar.

shores of the isles along with the wreckage of the warships and personal effects. Among the bodies was that of Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell.

Sir William Jumper, captain of the *Lenox*, stated that errors in the compasses had caused the navigational errors. And so the British Navy conducted a survey of compasses from the surviving ships and of those at Chatham and Portsmouth dockyards. The investigation showed what a poor state many of the compasses were in; at Portsmouth, for example, only four of the 112 wooden cased compasses from nine of the returning vessels were found to be serviceable.²

Steering a straight course through the dangers of the sea is difficult enough, but to attempt a sea voyage in a gale, and that without a reliable compass, is frequently disastrous. So it was with Shovell's fleet.

Steering a straight course through the gales of life is not merely difficult, it is impossible without a serviceable compass.

Paul in his first letter to Timothy wrote,

1 Timothy 1:18 This command I entrust to you,
Timothy, my son, in accordance with the
prophecies previously made concerning you, that
by them you may fight the good fight, 19 keeping
faith and a good conscience, which some have
rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their
faith. 20 Among these are Hymenaeus and
Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan,
so that they may be taught not to blaspheme.

Keeping a straight course in one's Christian life involves "fighting the good fight." We wage this battle on different fronts, but in whatever front, or calling, the Christian might have, we fight with the strength that God has supplied. Paul

² Scilly Isles, UK, Naval Disaster of 1707.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scilly_naval_disaster_of_1707.

wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, in the 6th Chapter and verse ten,

Ephesians 6:10 Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. 11 Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, 15 and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; 16 in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. 17 And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit...

Our warfare is spiritual. The armor that Paul describes prepares us to fight spiritual battles, and to fight those without retreat. The armor prevents contestants from suffering spiritual death, from being taken prisoner, and from desertion. It has also been argued that the armor of the Christian is not for the back. So face the enemy, and stand firm.

During the Civil War there was a cavalry officer who rode a horse that had a fear of guns. After a skirmish with the enemy one day, the officer was forced to withdraw in haste. So he swung his horse around and rode toward his own lines.

As he rode away an opposing soldier fired a shot that struck his horse on the rump. The effect this had on the officer we can only guess, but it greatly impressed the horse. Thereafter, the horse would not turn its rear to the enemy.

Besides motivating the horse, this must have had a salutary effect on the officer's career, and greatly increased other people's estimate of his courage.

Sometimes Christians need just such an impetus to keep their spiritual life going in the proper direction.

Paul said,

“having done everything... stand firm.”

So don't turn your back, spiritually. Resist the Devil and he will flee from you.

The Apostle also told Timothy,

1 Timothy 6:7 For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.
8 And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang.

To tempt a Christian away from Christ—and his proper course in life—the world dangles before him a lucrative income, success in one's career and homes in the right neighborhood. It's a choice the servant of Christ must overcome. And it is infinitely better to take the Apostle's advice,

1 Timothy 6:11 But flee from these things, you man of God; and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good

confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, 14 that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which He will bring about at the proper time—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; 16 who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

- To “fight the good fight” leads naturally to keeping the confession.
- The Good Confession is similar to the Pledge of Allegiance.
- The Good Confession is a pledge of allegiance to Christ as Lord.

Stephen is the example of a Christian who kept his confession even unto death. He steered a true course through the storm of persecution, and the Lord allowed him at the last to gaze intently into Heaven and see the glory of God and the Lord Himself standing at the right hand of God.

In Second Chronicles the 14th, 15th, and 16th chapter the Bible tells us about Asa, king of Judah. Asa called upon the name of Jehovah, and the Lord routed the Ethiopians before the armies of Judah and Benjamin. The Ethiopians had attacked with an army of a million men, outnumbering Asa's army by nearly two to one. They also had chariots.

After the victory the prophet Azariah said to Asa,
2 Chronicles 15:2 "Listen to me Asa, and all Judah
and Benjamin: the Lord is with you when you are
with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you

find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you."

In other words, Asa, you have a choice: Seek the Lord and His favor and He will be with you; but if you disown Him, He will also disown you.

Think about it.

In the 36th year of his reign Asa had war with the king of Israel, Baasha. Instead of calling on the Lord to deliver him, Asa took gold and silver from the treasuries of the Temple and sent it to Ben-hadad, king of Syria. Instead of asking for the help of Jehovah, Asa asked the king of Syria to deliver him.

Ben-hadad delivered him.

But Hanani the seer came to see Asa. He said,

2 Chronicles 16:7 ... "Because you have relied on the king of Syria and have not relied on the Lord your God, therefore the army of the king of Syria has escaped out of your hand. 8 Were not the Ethiopians and the Lubim an immense army with very many chariots and horsemen? Yet, because you relied on the Lord, he delivered them into your hand. 9 For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that he may strongly support those whose heart is completely His. You have acted foolishly in this. Indeed, from now on you will surely have wars."

Asa made a bad choice when he enlisted Ben-hadad to help him. He abandoned God.

Asa's reaction to the rebuke from Hanani the seer—he didn't like it. Asa became angry with the seer and put him in prison. Asa also oppressed some of the people at the same time.

Then there was the matter of Asa's feet.

In verse 12 of chapter 16 it says,

16:12 And in the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa became diseased in his feet. His disease was

severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord but the physicians.

What is the lesson in the choices that Asa made? Asa's example is that of a backslider. He began well, but ended trusting in outsiders rather than the Lord.

He did not keep faith in the Lord.

Steering a straight course through the temptations and trials of life involves keeping a good conscience because a defiled and wounded conscience is both a burden and an obstacle to fellowship with Christ.

The Bible tells about the shame of Adam and Eve after they had made the choice to eat of the forbidden fruit,

Genesis 3:8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 And he said, "I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself."

Adam and Eve had by their sinful behavior corrupted their consciences. As it happens many times with sinners, their defiled consciences motivate them to hide from the Lord. In the presence of the Lord the sinner feels naked; i.e., ashamed, embarrassed or guilty. The shame of nakedness arises from conscience, where the person knows the will of God, and understands that their behavior has been contrary to God's will.

Joseph tested his brothers when they were sent to Egypt to buy grain because of the famine in Palestine. In Genesis the scriptures say,

Genesis 42:18 Now Joseph said to them on the third day, "Do this and live, for I fear God: 19 if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you,

go, carry grain for the famine of your households, 20 and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die.” And they did so. 21 Then they said to one another, “Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us.” 22 And Reuben answered them, saying, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do not sin against the boy’; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood.”

The conscience of the sinner accuses and convicts him much like Reuben accused his brothers. The brothers had threatened to murder Joseph, but later relented and sold him into slavery. The brothers knew what they did was wrong. They did not keep a good conscience.³

Their choices in life had been sinful and so they suffered for it later.

David made a grievously bad choice when he sinned with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.⁴ Then a day came when Nathan the prophet pointed out his sin to him. Conscience stricken, David wrote in the 51st Psalm,

Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
11 Do not cast me away from Thy presence,
And do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me.
12 Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation,
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
13 Then I will teach transgressors Thy ways,
And sinners will be converted to Thee.

³ Genesis 37:20.

⁴ 2 Samuel Chapter 11.

David saw his behavior in relation to God's law and was ashamed. He appealed to God to cleanse his heart and that is the proper move for the penitent. Nevertheless, David's choice to violate the commands of God brought calamity upon his house and upon his posterity. God told him that because of his sin that the sword would never depart from his house, and that his wives would openly commit adultery against him.⁵

A properly trained conscience can be of great help to the Christian who wishes to steer a straight course through temptations. So, let us not be like the Hebrews who languished in their studies of the scriptures and became vulnerable to false and harmful teaching by those who would take advantage of their ignorance. It is as the writer of Hebrews said about the weightier teaching about the Christ,

Hebrews 5:11 Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Therefore, read the scriptures regularly and diligently and become wise in the proper behavior. The word translated "senses" refers to the "capacity to perceive clearly and hence to

⁵ 2 Samuel 12:10-12.

understand the real nature of something.”⁶ With this faculty the Christian is able to chart his course more accurately. Make a better decision.

The remedy for a defiled conscience is the blood of Christ.

Hebrews 9:8 The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed, while the outer tabernacle is still standing, 9 which is a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, 10 since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

- The remedy for the defiled conscience is the blood of Christ.
- The goal of Paul’s preaching included the good conscience.

1 Timothy 1:5 But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

⁶ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (383). New York: United Bible Societies: **αἰσθητήριον**.

In December 1944 the U. S. Naval Task Force 38 under the command of Admiral William “Bull” Halsey was conducting air raids against Japanese airfields in the Philippines. Halsey brought his ships to within 300 miles of the targets and was sailing off the east coast of Luzon in the Philippine Sea. As it happens to most warships that sail the sea Halsey’s ships ran short of fuel and had to be refueled. So they began to refuel the ships—at sea. Now, refueling at sea is difficult enough, but Halsey faced another problem. A typhoon was bearing down on his fleet.

Admirals are in command to make decisions, and that is why they are admirals. Halsey decided to continue the refueling while thinking that Typhoon Cobra would allow him enough time to complete the operation. He was wrong. The information given to Halsey about the location and direction of the typhoon was inaccurate. On December 17, Halsey unwittingly sailed the Third Fleet into the heart of the typhoon.

Weather conditions worsened considerably. Refueling had to be abandoned. Smaller ships, like destroyers and destroyer escorts, had smaller fuel tanks, and so their need for fuel occurred more frequently. Lack of fuel also meant lack of ballast to keep the ship steady in the larger waves. The wind from the typhoon rose to 100 mph; seas became mountainous, and the rain fell in torrents. Three destroyers capsized and sank, and 790 lives were lost. Nine other warships were damaged, and over 100 aircraft were wrecked or washed overboard; the aircraft carrier Monterey was forced to battle a serious fire that was caused by a plane hitting a bulkhead.

Like Admiral Shovell, Halsey made a bad choice based on bad advice. The quality of the advice was no excuse either to the shoals of the Isles of Scilly, or to Typhoon Cobra. Ships still sank, and sailors still died. As it was for the Third Fleet, so it is with our personal lives. Sometimes we sail into the storms of

life unwittingly or under bad advice, but we still suffer the consequences. The storms of life don't care if you know about them or not. They just are. The truth is there is only one compass for sailing through the storms and hazards of this life, and that compass is the Bible. Like the compass that points to the North, the Bible always points to One Person, and that is Christ.

As we read in Hebrews,

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Paul's apostolic course led him through many perils, imprisonments and pains. Nevertheless, Paul kept the faith as an apostle of Christ. He weathered the hurricanes of life. He was therefore qualified to give this advice:

2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Paul was as a ship's master, charting a course through a tumultuous sea of unbelief and persecution. Yet, he wavered not in the direction he took. He never looked back. He finished his course. And he kept the faith.

Many believe that Paul wrote the book of Hebrews, and well he could have. For we read in the Tenth Chapter of that book,

Hebrews 10:19 Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.

That is a course worthy of charting—and following.