

# WRECK OF THE SHIP CALLED THE “LONDON;”

## A Word of Solemn Instruction Therefrom

### A SERMON

Preached on Lord’s Day Morning January 21st, 1866

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At the Surrey Tabernacle, Wansey Street

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“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” Psalm 90:12

THESE words have been with me several days, and I felt I must this morning say a few things upon them. And the way the words came to my mind, with considerable power, was the report, which you have all doubtless read, of the dreadful disaster of two hundred and twenty of our poor fellow-creatures on the 11th of this month sinking helplessly to the bottom of the sea. (The magnificent ship called the “London” was lost in the Bay of Biscay, off the coast of Spain, on Thursday, the 11th of this month.) And I felt that there were so many things connected with that disaster instructive to the Christian, that I thought it would not be unprofitable to make a few remarks thereon this morning. And I do so as an act of sympathy towards my fellow-creatures at large; I do so as an Englishman, interested in every national calamity that overtakes us, and every national blessing with which we are favored; I do so as a Christian, because, knowing the terror of the Lord, it is right that we should persuasively use the Scriptures, to be the means, if it be God’s pleasure, of bringing others into that wisdom possessing which, whatever may befall them temporally, their souls are safe for eternity. I do so also as a minister; a minister is called upon to exercise proper discretion; it is for him to know what events he ought to pass by, and what events he ought to take-some little notice of. This disaster, connected with many others of the kind with which we are familiar, does remind us very solemnly of the uncertainty of human life, and gives great emphasis to the language of our text, “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom”. I will therefore, in the first place, notice *those impressions which this circumstance has made on my mind*; and then, secondly, *what it is for the heart to be savingly applied unto that wisdom which descends from above*.

You will, of course, understand that it is at an infinite distance from my mind, the thought of passing anything in the shape of a censure upon the brave-hearted captain. He appears to have made that kind of mistake that is very instructive; by spiritualizing that mistake we may apply the lesson to ourselves, and take the advantages thereof. Now had it been the captain’s lot to have been guided by the usual signs and signals, speaking after the manner of men, he would not have gone

into that disaster. Well, then, our text seems to come in, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Now there is a sign and if we are not guided by that sign, and the correlative signs connected, with that one sign, then we shall plunge into a destruction infinitely worse, and fall into a deep, infinitely deeper, never, never again to return. What solemn instances we have in the Bible of men disregarding signs, and thereby going on to destruction. Now, then, what is the sign that we have to regard, to be guided by? Well, the sign that we have to regard and to be guided by is the Lord Jesus Christ. You will find in the 19th of Isaiah that he is there called a sign in the land of Egypt, Egypt there, I apprehend, meaning the Gentile world; he is the sign that we are to take heed unto and to be guided by; and if we take heed unto this sign, the correlative signs I will notice presently, if we are guided by that sign, then we are sure to be saved; then

"No fatal shipwreck shall we fear,  
But all our treasures with us bear."

Now the Lord has said, "In that day shall there be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord." The altar, of course, means the Lord Jesus Christ as the sacrifice for sin, and the pillar at the borders thereof seems to be an allusion to the fiery cloudy pillar that accompanied the Israelites when they went out from Egypt; and this cloudy pillar is a type or figure of those witnesses for God by which he draws sinners to himself. It is said of the pillar that it was at the border; and so the pillar of God's truth, as that cloud was to draw, as it were; the Israelites out of Egypt, and then protect them, and then show, them the way into freedom, and then guide them through the wilderness, and see them safe into the promised land, so the glorious gospel of God, Jesus Christ, of course, being in that gospel the center of attraction; I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." Now, then, has he been made a sign unto us? We look at Jesus, and we say, What does it mean? Why, it means this, that all men by nature are sinners, all men by nature are in a lost condition, and that there is a wrath to come, that there is a judgment to come, that there is an eternal, fatal storm to come, destroying body and soul, as to all hope or help of ever regaining one particle of comfort that death shall rob us of. Then what is Jesus Christ? He is the sign of the way of escape from this. So, then, if we see him as the altar of God; if we see that he has by his sacrifice put sin away, and having been made a curse for us, there, therefore, is no more curse, there is no more wrath; if we see him as a sign this way, that is, if we are guided by him, believing in him, looking to him, and longing after him, for he has said, "Him that comes to me I will in no wise cast out;" if we regard him, and are attracted by him, then we shall escape the wrath to come, the Lord will be on our side, and we have by Jesus Christ this wonderful declaration; "I have sworn," the Lord says, and that oath is entirely by the sacrifice of Christ, to those who are attracted by it as their only hope, to those who are attracted by it as their only foundation, "I have sworn that I will not be angry with you." It matters not how great Satan's wrath may be, if God be not angry with you; it matters not how great the wrath of men may be, for "the wrath of man shall praise him, and the remainder of it shall he restrain;" it matters not how wrathful fellow-creatures may be with you; if the Lord be not angry with you, if he has made you an object of that promise, "I will not be angry with you, nor rebuke you; the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed, but my lovingkindness shall, not depart, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, says the Lord that has mercy upon you." Guided, then, by Jesus Christ as the sacrifice for sin, I shall escape all storms. Now as the pillar was to attract the Israelites, so after it had drawn them, just look at the goodness of the Lord, just look at the beauty of the gospel. After the Lord had drawn them by the pillar, he did not say, Now I have brought you out of Egypt you

must defend yourselves. No, “the cloud went, from before their face, and stood behind them,” Just so sure as I have drawn you, I will now protect you. And so, the Lord did protect them; not one hair of the head of one Israelite was hurt by any of the Egyptians, for they could not come near the Israelites now; the Lord stepped in and was their protection. I think you that are Christians will catch the thought. I should think it is this, that if Jesus be attractive to you, let that stand as a sign that God is your defense, that God is your helper, that God is your strength, that God is on your side, and you may, in the face of whatever may stand against you, say, If God be for us, who can be against us?” And then this cloud also afforded them light; here is attraction, and protection, and light. And does not the gospel by Jesus Christ afford us light? They saw their way through the sea; all was tranquil, all was peaceful. So, what light does the gospel afford us? This light showed them the complete destruction of their adversaries, and their own complete deliverance; so the light of the gospel shows to us the complete destruction of sin and death, the complete destruction, virtually, of all tribulation; so that not one of these Egyptians can ultimately move his tongue against any of the children of Israel. And as the same light showed them the completeness of their salvation, for they all passed safely through the sea, there was not one feeble person among them; the presence of the Lord made them strong. So, the gospel shows the completeness of God’s salvation. Then, fourth, the cloud abode by them in the wilderness, and there was not one believer that fell in the wilderness. Those that fell never were real believers; they were unbelievers, and by a disbelief of God’s truth they fell; but those that were believers, they abode by the Lord, and Moses, with his face shining, and feeling, the pleasure of the thought, said, “You that did cleave unto the Lord your God” not you that have deserved or merited anything at his hands, but you who have felt your need of his mercy, you who have felt your need of his grace, you who are at home with him in his truth, “you that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive unto this day.” Now if Jesus Christ be thus unto us the sign, if he be an attraction to us, then he is our protection, he is our light, and that cloudy fiery pillar that will guide us all our journey through, and see us safely landed at last. “So,” then, “teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom,” unto this true sign, this true expression of God’s love, and hereby escape being drowned in perdition, and be found at last at God’s right hand.

Then look at the correlative signs, and see the sovereignty of God. See the plagues that came upon Egypt, what were they? They were signs of the presence of Jehovah; but Pharaoh and the Egyptians soon forgot them, and soon despised them, and passed by them, and rushed on to their own destruction. But the Israelites, at least the right-minded, understood the signs, they were guided by them, they gathered together to leave Egypt, they understood the paschal lamb; they understood all the previous signs, and were saved. And so, all the calamities that abound in the world should be signs unto us. There is a calamity overtaken that man, there is a disaster at sea, there is an affliction on land. What are all these things? Why, they are all signs of the judgment of God, and of our need of the mercy of that God who can at any time, as Watts says,

“Dash whole worlds to death,  
And make them when he please.”

Again, for I must pass by a great many, what the Lord did in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and sustaining them in the wilderness, defeating the Amalekites and the Amorites, the tidings of these mighty doings reached the Canaanites, but they did not understand them. If they had understood the signs, each little king, for the kingdoms of Canaan were not so large, each kingdom,

as the counties of England, each little king would have gathered his people together, and would have said, "Now, then, we have heard what the God of the Hebrews has done to the Egyptians, and what he has done to the Amalekites and Amorites; we have heard this, and we know it is vain for us to attempt to stand against such a God as this; it is vain for us to rebel against such a God as this." But no, God, I must say so, I hope I am right in saying so, God in the deeps of his sovereignty permitted them, suffered them to be blinded. Yes, the language I am now using is not so strong as the language Moses uses in the beginning of Deuteronomy. He says of the king of Amorites, "The Lord your God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into your hand." So, then, if the judgments and mercies which the Bible proclaims have had their due effect with us, not unto us, but unto sovereign mercy, be the honor of our being so affected by these signs as to seek the Lord. Rahab heard of the signs; God gave her grace to understand them. "I know what they mean; they mean that your God is God in heaven above, and God in the earth beneath; they mean that your God has given you the land; they mean that all the inhabitants of the earth before you are as grasshoppers; these signs mean that your God does as he pleases among the armies of the heavens and the inhabitants of the earth; these signs show how sure the destruction of all must be that fight against him, therefore let me submit to him; and you are messengers come from him, and I want to be one of you, to be a worshipper of your God, to be a believer in your God, to be kept a believer in your God." She understood the signs, believed them, acted upon them, and perished not with them that believed not. Thus, then, well for us if we have been so blessed as to apply our hearts unto wisdom, as to understand Christ as the sign; and these correlative signs, to understand them, fall in with them, follow them out to our eternal salvation and God's eternal glory.

But let us come a little farther to another part. The doctrine of signs is a doctrine spread all through the Scriptures; but I come now to a part that I feel very anxious you should understand clearly. The Savior said to the Pharisees, "You can discern the face of the sky; but can you not discern the signs of the times?" Now if we this morning can clearly understand what those signs were, then I think it will be profitable to us. Now the Old Testament prophets, all of them, culminated their prophecies in a certain period; "In that day;" "At that time;" these are general expressions with all the prophets, pointing, therefore, to the times of the Messiah. Now what were the signs that proved to all the world that he was the Messiah, that is if they had paid attention to it? I do not believe that man is rationally dead, or morally dead, or physically dead. I happen to be a believer in human accountability, though not in the sense some hold it. Now the miracles that he wrought were to the disciples, who saw them, one class of signs and proofs that Christ was the Messiah. Why, even the simple circumstance, for really it is simple in comparison of some other wonders he wrought, of turning the water into wine, it is said, "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and his disciples believed on him." And the Pharisees among themselves, for while they could not know him savingly they might know him rationally and morally, so as to cease to persecute him, the Pharisees among themselves might have assembled, and among themselves said, "Well, there is a dead man raised, the leper healed, the blind eye opened, no operations performed in these cases; he does it all by his own word, and by his own power; why, these are signs and proofs that this is the Messiah, that this is the Son of God, that this is the Christ of God." But they could not see this, or would not see this. Many are the lessons of instruction that come out incidentally in the Scriptures, and so upon this point, now, the words of Nicodemus are very instructive. "Master, we know;" we, who is "we"? you are not "we," you are only one. "Well, but I am a ruler, a teacher in Israel, and we know, all of us, that you are a teacher come from God." How do you know it? "For

no man can do these miracles that you do, except God be with him.” Now these were the signs and proofs that that was the day of the Messiah, and these miracles are still on record, these are signs at the present time, and they will be signs down to the end of time; the miracles of Christ will never cease to be the signs of his Messiahship. And we are governed wonderfully by those signs. If you watch the feelings of the Christian, you will find him very much governed by those signs. Why, you say, how so? Why, he fed a multitude with five loaves and two fishes; bless his holy name! then he will feed me. He opened the eyes of the blind gratuitously, without any pain to the man; Lord, open mine eyes. He cleansed the leper; and so of all the rest. We almost instinctively, I mean that term rather, of course, in the Christian than in the creature sense, turn those miracles to advantage, and plead them before the Lord, as they are demonstrations of his mercy, his skill, and his goodness, what he will do. Now the apostles took great notice of those signs. “Jesus, a man among you approved of God;” where were the signs of divine approbation? The miracles which he did; those were the signs that the times of the Messiah were commenced; and they still stand as signs. But to us there is a greater sign, namely, his wondrous life, his sinless life. My heart has, I hope, in a humble measure, realized the truth of those words, “In your righteousness shall they be exalted.” My sinful nature presses me down; my conscience sometimes presses me down; my infirmities and rebellions press me down; but when I can lose sight of these, and lay hold of the sinless life of Jesus, the meritorious life of Jesus, the righteous life of Jesus, my heart rises in sweet affection to God, to remember that by his righteousness we are freed from condemnation. Just so sure as this is our life, namely, Christ’s righteousness, just so sure we shall be glorified; for “whom he justified, them he also glorified.” Hear Jesus! wondrous life! We love him in his life, worship him in his life, rejoice in him in his life; his life is our life, we live by his life. There was nothing he did that had not in it infinite and eternal worth. Another great sign to us is his wondrous death. Oh, what a sure sign! He is indeed that Root of Jesse that stands as “an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek;” and so, we have. “And his rest shall be glorious.” His resurrection to us is a sign; his ascension, his calling us by his grace, every doctrine of the Bible, is a sign; The testimony of God’s love, God’s choice, God’s decree, God’s covenant, all these stand as signs, and we are guided by them, so shall we escape all storms, and be landed safe at last. So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts first unto the essential sign, Christ Jesus, and be guided by him, then we shall be saved; then take all the correlative signs that shall expand our minds, enlarge our hearts, endear our God, make his holy ways pleasant and delightful unto us.

Now mark the next lesson of instruction is that of the difficult escape of some; nineteen, leaving two hundred and twenty to perish; And yet what a miracle it was that they escaped as they did! they escaped very narrowly, and with great difficulty. All this brings this truth vividly to our minds, every Christian is saved with great difficulty, escapes with great difficulty, and his escape is narrow, though as safe as though there was no danger in it. “If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” Only the Christian’s danger or difficulty of being saved, and the difficulty of those few in the boat, of course, differed in kind, they, are analogous so far as the fact stands. Wherein, then, lies the Christian’s danger, wherein lies the scarcity? The scarcity of the salvation does not lie in God, nor in Christ, nor in the Holy Spirit, nor in the Scriptures; but there is a scarcity somewhere, and that scarcity makes it difficult, that scarcity makes it true that the righteous scarcely are saved.

Wherein lies the scarcity? I need not tell you, because you all know where it lies; you know it lies in your faith. You have but little faith; sometimes just enough to hold on, and that is all; and you

have but little hope, sometimes it is almost black despair. Many a church member knows what it is to say, I feel really that my hope is gone; my nature is vile, my heart is wicked, I am nothing but a hypocrite; I will send in my resignation, I will go away into desperation and despair; there is no hope for me, I shall be damned at last, and I had better give it up at once. There is the scarcity. Many a child of God has had the bubbling's up of some of the worst dregs, you must forgive the plainness of my language, some of the worst dregs of hell have bubbled up in the mind of the believer; so that he has called in question the truth of the Bible, the reality of religion, whether it is not all a sham and all a delusion, something contrived to keep men in awe, without any reality in it. Then how is it that you are not destroyed? Why, for these reasons: first, because Jesus Christ has prayed for you that your faith fail not, therefore it shall not fail fatally; and your hope shall not fail fatally; and he that has begun the good work will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ. "I," said David, "was brought very low, but he helped me."

You will observe that these nineteen who were favored to escape, there was no hypocrisy about them. You may depend upon it they did not pretend that they wanted to escape; you may depend upon it they worked with all their might, and took hold of the captain's words, who, almost with his last breath, as you are aware, told them which way to steer. They were sincere about it. And so where the work is real in the heart there will be sincerity, there will be perseverance, there will be a striving, there will be earnest prayer; and however low your faith or hope may be, there will, be earnestness; and if that earnestness should seem neutralized, it will alarm you the more, it will frighten you the more. Why, you will say, I do not know where I am going to; all my concern seems to be passing off; and you will be concerned because you are not concerned, alarmed because you are not alarmed, distressed because you are not distressed, grieved because you are not grieved, sorrowful because you are not sorrowful, cast down because you are not cast down, and you will groan because you cannot groan, This may seem paradoxical, but it is the feeling of the real child of God. But they did escape, and so shall you if thus brought to look to the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, then, where the scarcity is. "If the righteous scarcely be saved." David said, "My feet had well-nigh slipped;" I apprehend the slipping there means apostasy; he had nearly glided off from the truth; "but your mercy, O Lord, held me up."

Then the third lesson of instruction I notice arises from a very simple circumstance. Just before the ship went down there was one man had his carpet bag, and he was very uneasy lest that should be lost, took it out of the steerage, and came on deck, to secure his carpet bag; he did not seem to be concerned about his life, or about his soul. Ah, is not this just it? Are not all of us by nature concerned for some trifle or another more than we are for our precious souls; concerned to save a little something that pertains to the flesh more than we are for that eternal salvation of the soul which can be obtained only by the groans of Calvary, the blood of an incarnate God? Ah, Satan cares not what amuses our minds if he can but keep us away from the weighty matters of faith, judgment, and mercy. Nor does old age alter this. You find some old men more worldly, if possible, more carnal than ever, and more concerned about their carpet bag than ever, containing a few things hardly worth five shillings, and yet more concern expressed about it than about the precious soul! The word of God says, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Well, then, that is a scriptural spirit where one of our hymns says,

"To scorn the trifles of a day,

For joys that none can take away."

For while that poor man lived but a few minutes afterwards, and was engulfed in the deep, how do we know when the summons shall come to us? Why, the question is asked by our pulse sixty times every minute whether we shall live or die. How uncertain are all things in this world! The Lord make us less and less concerned for mere trifles, more and more concerned for divine and eternal realities.

The next lesson of instruction I notice, and I approach it carefully, is, that of the helplessness of the two hundred and twenty that perished; The captain must have been a brave-minded man; He almost reminds me, in some of his words, of One who is called the Captain of our salvation; for it appears that if he had not told those in the boat which way to steer, they, perhaps, too, would have been lost. And I am sure our Captain tells us which way to steer. And that captain was really very brave when he said to those who in the boat invited him to leave the ship, and join them, "Your duty is there; mine is here; here I will stay, and I will go down with them." Well, Jesus Christ went down with his people; he was with them, and he would not leave them: he went down with them into the deeps of God's wrath; only he could do what a mortal captain could not do, he himself could come up again, and bring his people with him: "Your dead men shall live; with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, you that dwell in dust." Now look at the helplessness. I will not dwell upon some of the things that affect one's mind; such as the poor little children, twelve months, eighteen months, two years old, wondering, wondering what all this commotion meant. Poor little dears, they are better off, I could hope, in my natural feelings, that all the two hundred and twenty that were lost are in heaven; I could hope so; that, of course, I must leave to the great God. There were, at any rate, two, I think, ministers, and some believing men on board.

The scene is very affecting and very solemn; and I say, if we were to have many more such, disasters, together with diseases about, and one thing and the other, it would call, I think, for a national fast day. For that is what I hold with. I do not like the manner in which the fast day is proclaimed in England; I do not like the Queen commanding churches and chapels, meaning the Church of England. I should like such a request to come direct from the Queen to all the population of England, irrespective of sect and denomination, and I would leave the nation to publicly and solemnly humble themselves before God under any calamity or calamities. I believe God accepts that for what it is, as the homage of his creatures; as was the case with the Ninevites; for this temporal homage turns temporal judgments away, and brings temporal mercies in. But see, I say, the helplessness, how helpless they were! One of the most magnificent ships that ever traversed the ocean (this ship now lost was capable; I suppose, of carrying a cargo of five thousand tons) tossed about like a feather. Why, the sea cared no more for that ship than it would for a feather, tossed it about as if it were nothing. How utterly helpless they were! We will suppose that we had been there, and we had been for five days in distress, as they were; and presently we should see the dear Savior come, walking on those boisterous seas, and that he should throw in one short sentence, "Peace, be still;" and in one instant the great waves calm, not a ripple to be seen, nor breeze to be felt. How astonished we must have been! He could have done that, but he did not. His judgments are a great deep. I know worldly men will say, Ah, you must not bring religion into things that take place from certain natural causes. Who established those natural causes? If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without Jehovah's permission, and if it cannot direct its flight without God's hand to uphold it, much less can two hundred and twenty of our fellow-creatures

be thus hurled to the bottom of the ocean helplessly, and into eternity, without God's permission. And yet, affecting as this circumstance is, it is nothing in comparison of the last great day, no, I may even go farther, and say that it is nothing in comparison of the days of Noah, when the whole world was engulfed, and few, that is, eight, were saved. What a picture do both the circumstances present! And the few being saved brings home with power those solemn words, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, that leads unto life, and few there be that find it."

The next and the last lesson I shall notice to give emphasis to our text, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" the last I notice is, the preserved by prevention. Some who had booked places afterwards could not go; others who wished to go, but could not, and were very much put out. One young man, we see, had got on board, and was actually going, but his parents felt so concerned about him, very naturally, that his brother was sent, and almost by force took him off from the ship, so that he could not have his own way, and no doubt now he is glad enough of it. Here, then, is a lesson for us. There is great advantage apparently coming to you if you take certain steps; the Lord stops you, and he stops you in mercy. You do not know what good you get by some of your losses; you do not know what good you get by some of the thwarting thrown in your path. Ah, if I could have gone so-and-so, and so-and-so. And now how glad they will be that they did not go! But then, if they stop there, poor things, if it is their lot to stop in that comfort, then, if I were to see one of them, or suppose one of them were within the reach of my voice, I should say, Well, you must feel thankful to a kind Providence that prevented you going; but if you stop there you stop short. Recollect there is an ocean you have to meet yet; there is a storm on the way towards you now; there is a shipwreck before you now, infinitely worse than that you have escaped. If the Lord should be pleased to impress this upon their minds, they will say, Ah, I forgot the greater shipwreck, the shipwreck of the soul; I forgot the greater ocean, the ocean of God's wrath; I forgot that while I have been preserved from this temporal calamity, there is a calamity that is eternal. How will things go with me then, when I come to the swelling of Jordan? And if God should bring the language of our text into their souls, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom," how great will be their gain!

Thus, then, these things impressed themselves upon my mind. I am not much accustomed to take notice of passing events, but there are some that I think it would be hard-hearted, unchristian, unkind, and unsympathetic towards the memory of those who are engulfed, to pass by. I think we ought to show our sympathy towards the bereaved, and our sympathy as Christians for the souls of men, when we see these calamities abounding. I do therefore hope you will not think I have stepped un-necessarily out of my way this morning.

Now time does not permit me to describe *what it is for the heart to be applied unto wisdom*. It would take a whole sermon to point out what the wisdom is, namely, that wisdom that makes wise to salvation; for if we know Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God; if we know him, we know everything, for in him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Now there are four things essential for the heart to be established in wisdom; I will just name them, and close. First, a concern about it. All of us by nature are unconcerned, our language by nature is, Oh, let Christ go, let the soul go, let the gospel go, let eternity go, let heaven go, let hell go, I shall not encumber myself with any of these things. Such is our daring state by nature. But when the Lord in mercy causes us to feel the solemnity of these things, then there is a concern, then there is a cry, then



there is a desire. That is one thing essential. If the heart be not touched, and made to feel unhappy where it has been hitherto, it will not seek a new path.