



SAILING WITH THE BOW DOORS OPEN

Twenty years ago, on the 6th March 1987, the Herald of Free Enterprise sank just outside Zeebrugge harbour. This large roll-on roll-off car ferry had crossed the North Sea many hundreds of times and had already made four crossings on that day between Belgium and the UK.

When disaster struck 193 people lost their lives. The tragedy of this tragedy is that it was totally avoidable. It was not an accident. The ship sailed with the bow doors open.

It had become a regular practice for the ship to set sail before the bow doors were fully closed. On this occasion the crew were unusually late in closing them. As the ship hit the open sea, water flooded the car decks. The ship took a heavy list to one side as vehicles began to move and then the whole ship capsized in just 30 feet of water.

As I watched a documentary TV programme about the disaster God began to speak to me of the dangers of sailing through life with the bow doors open. The crew had set sail like this on many previous occasions without consequence, but on this occasion the unthinkable happened. The Captain of the ship was responsible for setting sail with the bow doors open. The crew were responsible for not closing the doors in time. The victims who died were innocent bystanders of an avoidable drama.

We are all individually responsible for the ship of our lives. If we are sailing with the bow doors open, then nothing untoward may happen for a long time. There is little danger when the waters are smooth. Complacency and pride can make us careless in our conduct. And when the unthinkable happens it's not only the individual who suffers, but all "the passengers" who were depending on us for their well being are in danger of becoming victims.

Those passengers include our own families, our colleagues, those who work for us and all who look to us for spiritual input and care at various levels of church life. For a Pastor or leader of a Christian ministry, the passengers include their whole congregation, staff and even the wider Body of Christ. When the disaster occurs to a high profile Christian leader the ripple effect can become a tsunami.

Many of those I have prayed with, whose lives had experienced some form of shipwreck, had been sailing through life with the bow doors of their lives wide open. For some, disaster struck by way of public exposure of immoral conduct. For others the torment of inner guilt was the root cause of personal breakdown. For yet others the circumstances of

life had turned against them and when everything was laid upon the table, it was painfully evident that bow doors which had been left open years ago had never been closed.

The enemy will use anything and everything in our lives which is out of harmony with God's covenant of blessing. The ten commandments are referred to as God's covenant in Deut. 4:13 – they represent God's very best for us. Unresolved sin issues always condense down to a willful choosing to ignore one or other aspect of God's covenant of blessing.

There may be reasons in the past as to why a particular sin has remained out of control – such as abuse or various aspects of parental damage – but sin is still sin and it is far better to face the fact of it and receive healing for the cause than to wrestle on one's own to close a bow door that has been jammed open and which seems immovable. There are answers.

If the bow doors are not closed there will come a time when disaster will strike. That is why the healing ministry must be a vital and integral part of Church life. It is the unhealed areas of our lives that leave us vulnerable to being overwhelmed with a flood. God wants to heal us before it's too late. He takes no pleasure in the casualties, pain and trauma of public shipwreck.

The history of Christian ministry is, sadly, punctuated with disasters caused by people sailing through life with bow doors open - and the more senior the person the greater the disaster. The Captain of the Herald of Free Enterprise was complacently doing what he had always done, but when disaster struck the consequences were terrible.

Just as this shipping disaster was totally avoidable, most of the spiritual disasters which give the enemy so much leverage in the Body of Christ are also avoidable. All that is required to begin the journey of hope is humility, open-ness and honesty.

Pride may say "I can never own up to this or that thing – it would not be edifying. I could never let anyone know what I'm really like on the inside". Pride also says "keep sailing even though the bow doors are open". Humility says, "get the doors closed before there is a disaster."

A Christian leader I know could no longer cope with the pressures of his calling. He pensioned himself off from service in the Body of Christ. He then heard how God had restored a colleague on one of our schools and discovered that the sexual problems of his youth had left a bow door wide open. For decades he had used all his surplus energy to try and keep the water out, but one can only do this for so long. The enemy was robbing him of his destiny. Today he is healed, restored and back in the front line. The bow door that the enemy had used to overwhelm him is now well and truly closed.

There are many disasters waiting to happen in the Body of Christ – people who are shipping water privately through open bow doors. Those disasters can be avoided. All the problems a person has in this life are not automatically resolved at conversion. When we get to heaven the old man will fall away, but right now we are still wrestling with the consequences of the fall – even after we are born again. Conversion is but the beginning of a journey of discipleship.

The name of the vessel that sank these twenty years ago was Herald of Free Enterprise. God wants each one of us to enter into the fullness of His destiny, but if we choose to live a life of Free Enterprise, independent of the discipline of God's love and without heeding Paul's advice to Timothy "Guard your life and doctrine closely" (1 Tim.4:16), then we will only give the enemy opportunity to one day sink the vessel.

When Paul told the Corinthian Church "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2) – he was speaking to those who already knew the Lord. In the New Testament the word salvation not only embraces entering the Kingdom of God, but the healing and deliverance of those who are already in the Kingdom.

Since 1987 over 3000 people have died in similar roll-on roll-off ferry disasters – because the lessons of earlier disasters were not learnt and applied by the crews of other vessels. Now is the day for getting our lives in order and closing all the bow doors there may be in our lives – testing days are coming when the waters may not be calm. We must take action now to remove the ground from our lives on which the enemy is standing and avoid more disasters in the Body of Christ.