

Walking by the Spirit
1 Corinthians 10; Hebrews 3
Northwest Community Church, 12/30/2012

Introduction

Trips aboard cruise ships were the vacation of choice for 17 million leisure travelers this past year. According to industry marketing, "today's ships offer a new generation of onboard features and a world of innovation, including surf pools, planetariums, water parks, ice skating rinks, rock climbing walls and much more." Wow ... sounds like an amazing experience!

In January of this year, passengers boarded the Costa Concordia in Italy anticipating just such an experience. Their ship was a 15-story floating palace, big enough to house a small town of 4,000 people, twice the size of the Titanic.

But on the evening of Friday January 13, the Costa Concordia struck a reef off the coast of Italy and was shipwrecked, causing great calamity and massive destruction. The toll included at least 30 deaths, 60 injuries, 4200 people to be evacuated, and the total loss of a ship worth over half a billion dollars.

Paul used the word picture of "shipwreck" in the context of the Christian experience in 1 Timothy 1.

This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. (1:18-19)

This word picture of "shipwreck" vividly communicates destruction on a massive scale. Rarely a month goes by without national news of another well-known person who has experienced a shipwreck experience, including:

- Professional athletes,
- Popular entertainers,
- Powerful politicians,
- Prominent religious leaders, and
- Highly-decorated military officials.

These failures caused far-reaching disastrous consequences for themselves and those nearest to them, including ruined careers, broken marriages and families, and even death.

It stands to reason that for every shipwreck experience that makes the national news, there are likely countless others that happen to people like you and me, "broken-world" experiences [as Christian author Gordon MacDonald describes them] that don't make the headlines yet are also devastating in their fallout. Let's consider this morning how we as Christians can maintain a soft heart toward God and remain very responsive to the Holy Spirit's promptings and mid-course corrections, so that we avoid straying off course to such an extent that we bring serious destruction to ourselves and those around us.

Glorious Salvation

Those of us who have had the privilege of attending at Northwest the past few months during the sermon series on Romans have come to understand more fully the glorious salvation that has been received by every person who has put their faith in Jesus as their Savior. Let's think together about some of the words used to describe that salvation and their implications.

Believers have been justified.

Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 3:22-24)

Everyone who has believed in Jesus has been justified, declared righteous.

- We are not out on bail awaiting a future trial with an uncertain verdict.
- The Judge of the universe has already ruled and He has declared us righteous with the righteousness of Christ.

Believers have received a free gift.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:23)

Everyone who has believed in Jesus has received from God the free gift of salvation.

- Our salvation is not like the employer match of a 401k that appears on account statements but does not fully vest until we fulfill conditions of continuous employment.
- Our salvation is not some kind of conditional standing that is dependent on us in any way, on our future actions or beliefs.
- God is not the type of giver who would take back what He freely gave us.
- We have received a gift from God that is truly free with no strings attached.

Believers have received eternal life.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:23)

Everyone who has believed in Jesus has received eternal life.

- If eternal life could ever end it wasn't eternal, it was "temporary" or "potential" or "life to begin at a future date to be named later".
- We have received eternal life that can never end.

Believers have been adopted. In Romans we have seen references to adoption, which is expressed in more detail in Galatians 4.

But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son ... in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:4a,5,6)

Everyone who has believed in Jesus has been adopted by God.

- We are not foster children with an uncertain future receiving temporary care until we are reassigned to our next living situation.
- We have been adopted by God and so we are permanently His sons and daughters.

So as a result of these glorious truths and many others, we were not surprised that Paul concluded Romans 8 expressing the conviction that believers cannot be separated from God's love.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35a,38,39)

Christian Life

Since all who have believed in Jesus have a glorious salvation that is certain and secure, does that mean it makes no difference how we live now, that this life is insignificant in light of the glorious future that awaits us?

Remember that was the idea behind the question leading off Romans 6.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! (Rom. 6:1,2a)

Absolutely not, Paul exclaims, you couldn't be more wrong! This life has immense eternal significance as we "walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4) as "servants of righteousness" (6:18), faithfully living out the unique calling God has given each one of us. We can glorify God in a myriad of ways:

- We can share the gospel with others so that they too can receive this glorious salvation.
- We can faithfully bear up under severe adversity continuing to hold fast to God's goodness.
- We can bless others by serving them and showing God's mercy.
- We can point people to life by helping them understand and embrace God's transforming Word.
- We can manifest God's unconditional love by loving our enemies and blessing those who curse us.
- We can reflect to others the grace and forgiveness we have received from God.
- We can transform material resources into eternal treasure by investing in God's kingdom work.

And we could spend the rest of our time listing dozens of other ways we can glorify God.

And in so doing we can experience to a significant degree now that quality of life we will fully experience in heaven. Jesus, the only sinless man, epitomized this "abundant" life.

- He was in constant communion with the Father.
- People of all walks of life were drawn to Him like magnets.
- After interacting with Him people felt blessed and inspired and were enticed to know God better.

Author Philip Yancey observed people who were experiencing this abundance of life, but it wasn't the people he was expecting. He wrote of his opportunities as a journalist to interview "'stars' ... people who dominate the media." He says of them:

"Our 'idols' are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met.... [He goes on to tell of] ... broken marriages ... dependent on psychotherapy ... tormented by self-doubt.... I have also spent time with people I call 'servants'" [and lists people who work with lepers, the homeless, refugees, jungle tribes, outcasts]. I was prepared to honor and admire these servants, to hold them up as inspiring examples. I was not prepared to envy them. Yet as I now reflect on the two groups side by side, stars and servants, the servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones.... They possess qualities of depth and richness and even joy that I have not found elsewhere. Servants work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, 'wasting' their talents and skills among the poor and uneducated. Somehow, though, in the process of losing their lives they find them."¹

And as we glorify God and experience the abundance of life He has for us now, we also lay up for ourselves eternal reward and crowns and treasure that will add immense joy and fulfillment to our experience in heaven for all eternity.

Whatever our station of life, demographic, health condition, marital or family situation, we can glorify God and experience "life indeed" and lay up reward in heaven. That is such an appealing picture. So why don't we always live this way? What stands in our way?

¹ The Jesus I Never Knew, p. 118.

Sin

In a word, sin. We live in a broken world where sin and evil and decay run rampant, a "groaning creation" (Rom. 8:22). We are locked in a high stakes spiritual battle with sin. As Pastor Jeff taught in Romans 6, "sin is out to get us". What makes sin such a formidable and ferocious foe?

(1) Sin is destructive – in our lives and the lives of others. The Bible repeatedly links sin and death, as we have recently seen in Romans 6.

- 6:16 - "sin resulting in death"
- 6:20-21 - "For when you were slaves of sin ... the outcome of those things is death"
- 6:23 - "the wages of sin is death"

Sin is destructive, the certain outcome of moving away from God and life. That is what makes sin sin. It is not (as some would have you believe) God trying to rob us of fun. When we sin we miss out on the abundance of life God intends for us now and instead experience emptiness and destruction.

That is why (as we also saw in Romans 6) even though the Christian is eternally forgiven sin still never makes sense. It is not a case of getting away with something. If you could promise me that I would never get arrested even if I used some major drug such as cocaine that is still the very last thing I would want to do. Becoming an addicted slave to cocaine would be terribly destructive in my life. It is not about external punishment, it is about destruction.

For me severe drug addiction is one of the most vivid pictures of the destructiveness of sin. Chronic bitterness, gossip, a judging spirit, lack of love, etc. also cause similar damage, but it is often not as obvious to us. All sin is destructive, but some sinful patterns of behavior create so much collateral damage in our lives and the lives of those around us that "shipwreck" is an appropriate image.

(2) A second factor that makes sin such a formidable foe – sin is deceptive.

But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Heb. 3:13)

Sin doesn't present itself to us and say "do this so you can destroy your life", it appears appealing and attractive. That deceptiveness is one factor that makes sin so very dangerous. It also explains why we look at many of these self-destructive acts in the world today and ask "what were they thinking?" Choices to sin always occur within the framework of a distorted perspective. If we saw things as they really are we would not sin, because from an objective point of view sin never makes sense, it always represents moving away from life and toward destruction.

(3) A third reason sin is such a formidable foe – sin is our disposition. We were "born into sin", we are hard-wired to sin as a result of the Fall. As Jeff taught recently in Romans 6, in Christ we are no longer slaves to sin, we have a choice. But still sin comes naturally, we have a propensity toward sin, it is our default behavior whenever we are not depending on God.

That means sin will be an ever present adversary until we get to heaven. We must have an intentional life strategy to walk more and more in the path of life, to maintain a soft heart toward God that is responsive to the Spirit's on-going course corrections, as opposed to becoming hardened and hard-hearted, where the only way God can get our attention is to bring major disruption our way.

Let's consider together three characteristics of such a life.

(1) Be a reflective student of Scripture (1 Cor. 10:6-11)

Let's turn to 1 Corinthians 10. In the verses at the end of chapter 9, Paul expresses his desire that as he runs the race of the Christian life he not be disqualified (a comparable metaphor to shipwreck).

For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea. (1 Cor. 10:1)

Paul points to the experiences of the Israelites in the Exodus as they left Egypt. In verses 1-4 he lists a series of blessings from God that they all experienced.

Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us. (1 Cor. 10:5,6a)

Paul goes on in verses 6-10 to list some of their major sins and the destructive consequences that ultimately disqualified them from entering into the Promised Land and experiencing its blessings.

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Cor. 10:11)

Since Scripture is God's Word, we might think that any Bible reading and study is a good thing. But in a broken world permeated by sin unfortunately there are ways to approach Scripture that do not further God's purposes and in fact obstruct them.

We may approach Scripture academically, for knowledge. The problem here is that knowledge can easily lead to pride and arrogance, not love, as Paul pointed out earlier in chapter 8.

Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know. (1 Cor. 8:1a,2)

A second deficient approach to the Bible is judgmentally, for what others are doing wrong and how they need to change. After reading a passage have you caught yourself thinking "I wish so and so would read this"? One warning sign to watch for in a group discussion is when the dominant pronoun is "they", directing the focus to the behavior and deficiencies of people not in the room. This can be accompanied by an emphasis on verses that reinforce how well I am doing, leading to self-righteousness. (Note that this approach to Scripture was perfected by the Pharisees but unfortunately continues to this day.)

But here Paul is encouraging us to read Scripture reflectively. Twice within six verses he exhorts his readers (and us) to learn from the Israelites' examples, to be reflective students of Scripture, to be especially on the lookout for how we may need to change. In the words of David from Psalm 139:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way. (Psalm 139:23-24)

"Holy Spirit, keep my heart soft to your promptings and mid-course corrections, point me toward Your path of life."

Supplementing the lessons of Scripture we can also learn from the life experiences of other Christians. Watch people who are loving, who bless and powerfully impact those around them, and see what you can learn from them. We can also learn from negative examples. If someone is on the other side of a self-destructive experience and is willing to share, learn from the sequence of smaller missteps that led to their bigger failure.

(2) Be fully convinced of my propensity to sin, placing all my confidence in God's power (1 Cor. 10:12-13)

Continuing in 1 Corinthians 10, verses 12 and 13 point us toward a second characteristic of a life that maintains a responsive heart toward God.

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Cor. 10:12)

When our confidence is in ourselves we are setting ourselves up for falling into sin. Verse 13 provides an alternative.

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Cor. 10:13)

As we depend on God He is faithful to provide an escape from temptation, the power to choose right and to walk in the path of life. I need to be fully convinced of my propensity to sin and place all my confidence in God's power.

Without using the words these verses call to mind the prominent New Testament theme of flesh vs. Spirit. The term "flesh" is used in a number of ways in the NT.

- Sometimes it is a synonym for our earthly bodies
- Sometimes it refers to overtly sinful actions, "deeds of the flesh"
- But other times it is used in contrast to Spirit, referring to what I do in my strength apart from God, activities relying on my own abilities and efforts, not on the Spirit who dwells in me.

Paul uses "flesh" in this way in Philippians 3 when he wrote about "putting confidence in the flesh." Romans 8 (as we recently saw) contrasted living according to the flesh and the Spirit.

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh -- for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Rom. 8:12-13)

Just as in 1 Corinthians 10, Romans 8 also presents only two alternative ways to live.

- (1) "According to the flesh" – depending on my own resources, which results in sin and is the way of death; or
- (2) "By the Spirit ... putting to death the deeds of the body" – depending on God's power, the way of life.

In Galatians Paul expressed this dependence on God as "walking by the Spirit."

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. (Gal. 5:16)

"'Walking by the Spirit' is an image used in Scripture to show that only an attitude of conscious and deliberate dependence on the Holy Spirit can free believers from the control of the flesh. To walk by the Spirit is to depend on the Holy Spirit rather than self for freedom from the flesh and obedience to righteousness."²

Imagine a person who due to disease, injury or aging cannot walk by his own power and thus is dependent upon a walker. He has only two choices for every step.

- (1) Lean on the walker (and move forward); or
- (2) Let go of the walker (and fall to the floor upon his next step).

² Bill Lawrence, "The Traitor in the Gates: The Christian's Conflict with the Flesh", p. 130. In his insightful article Lawrence compares the flesh to a double agent, a mole within the CIA. "Every believer has a traitor in the gates All of us trust the flesh, it is self, the self in which we have placed confidence all our lives.... The flesh is not just a sensuous, ugly kind of thing. It is often committed, dedicated, and religious.... Like a CIA mole the flesh is burrowed deep inside the believer, the head of the "anti-sin section", deceiving the believer into trusting it as it assists the enemy master it claims to resist.... In our fleshly dedication to Christ we become concerned about the Lord's work and our honor, about opportunities to serve Him and influence for ourselves" (p. 116) "The flesh is like the enemy within the gates who opens the way to the enemy who is pressing in through the gates." (Barclay, cited by Lawrence, p. 117) "One must learn better how to 'walk in the Spirit': but he will never come to a moment in this life when he will need to walk less by the Spirit." (Chafer, cited by Lawrence, p. 130)

Whether we realize it or not, due to the congenital disease of sin, we are all incapable of walking unaided in the path of righteousness. But God has provided a "walker" who is the Holy Spirit. Either we lean on the Holy Spirit to take each and every step in righteousness, or we let go thinking we can make it on our own, which means a certain fall.

The consistent message of all these passages is that self-confidence is not a minor vulnerability, a small "chink in the armor". It is lethal to the Christian life, it is the express lane to destruction, the 85 mph highway to shipwreck (to mix metaphors).

This is why prayer is such a crucial aspect of the Christian life. Prayer is our primary expression of dependence of God.

Richard Foster wrote a classic book Celebration of the Disciplines in which he covers prayer as one of twelve Christian disciplines. I submit to you that we should not regard prayer as one among many Christian activities of relatively equal priority. Prayer is absolutely foundational to every aspect of Christian life and ministry because dependence on God is foundational.

In every sphere of life that matters:

- in our personal conduct and interactions
- in our homes as parents and spouses
- in relationships in our schools or workplaces
- in any ministry activities we are involved in

If we aren't praying about these things, if our actions and interactions aren't dependent on the power of God, then by default we fall back on own resources which no matter how well-intentioned are "deeds of the flesh" that will not result in transformed lives and changed hearts, the eternally significant things that only God can do in our lives and the lives of others.

Ephesians 6 presents another reason why we must rely on God's power.

Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. 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. (Eph. 6:11-12)

We are in a spiritual battle, and going into spiritual battle relying on our own resources and not the power of God is like taking a BB gun onto a battlefield in war. "People who believe that God's sovereign power is the most critical element in effecting change pray. People who believe that their work is the most critical element in effecting change generally don't pray."³

We see the destructiveness of self-confidence and the futility of not depending on God prominently displayed in the life of the disciple Peter. In many respects Peter was without peer among the twelve, he was clearly the MVD (Most Valuable Disciple).

In Matthew 14 when Jesus was walking on water, Peter was the one who walked out toward him (14:25-29). In Matthew 16 when Jesus asked "But who do you say that I am?", Peter is the one who answered "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said these glowing words to him.

"Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it." (16:15-18)

High praise indeed!

³ Dave Smith, sermon manuscript 6/19/2005.

But Peter's confidence rested in himself. One of the first indicators came in the immediately following verses.

From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (Matt. 16:21-23)

"Rebuking" Jesus is a clearly a warning sign that something is amiss. But perhaps at this point we may still view self-confidence as only a minor blemish on the otherwise stellar resume of a superstar disciple.

Peter's self-confidence reached its culmination in the moments just prior to Jesus' arrest.

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.' But Peter answered and said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a cock crows, you shall deny Me three times." Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." (26:31,33-35a)

Peter could never become an apostle through whom God could work God-sized works as long as Peter's confidence was in himself. So for Peter (as for any of us) this self-confidence was not a cosmetic defect that warranted some tweaking, this was a lethal disease of the heart that required radical surgery.

At this point we see an interesting twist in this shipwreck theme. Up to now we have been considering a shipwreck as something to be avoided at all costs. But here we find Jesus orchestrating the shipwreck experience that was required in Peter's life to set him free from his deep-seated imprisonment to self-confidence.

God is so gracious that even if we become so hard-hearted that only a shipwreck-level of disruption can get through to us, He will do whatever it takes. God often works most powerfully in our lives in times of greatest disruption.

Everyone who knows Peter's story in Acts recognizes how profoundly he was transformed through his "shipwreck" experience, with the result that God now worked powerfully through him so that 3000 came to faith in Jesus through his preaching on the Day of Pentecost. And Peter's words in Acts 3 after the healing of the man born lame provide such a contrast to what we saw earlier.

While [the lame man who had been healed] was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement. But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all." (3:11,12,16)

What a transformation – "how could you even think it was our power ... it was Jesus!"

(3) Invite the counsel and feedback of others (Heb. 3:13)

For a third characteristic of a life that maintains a responsive heart toward God let's return to Hebrews 3:13.

But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Heb. 3:13)

If we truly believe that sin is extremely deceptive, then the "encouragement", the counsel and feedback of others becomes of critical importance. We will anticipate being vulnerable to having a distorted perspective in a multitude of situations and will eagerly seek out friends who can provide an objective point of view.

This need for counsel is also a very prominent theme in Proverbs where it is expressed in terms of wisdom and reproof.

He is on the path of life who heeds instruction, but he who forsakes reproof goes astray. (Prov. 10:17)

He whose ear listens to the life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.

He who neglects discipline despises himself, but he who listens to reproof acquires understanding. (Prov. 15:31-32)

He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, and he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself.

Do not reprove a scoffer, lest he hate you, reprove a wise man, and he will love you.

Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser, teach a righteous man, and he will increase his learning. (Prov. 9:7-9)

The wise person invites and welcomes reproof from others. How do you see my falling short in loving the people in my life? Where you see me going astray in my priorities and use of time? What are the ways I am impacting the dynamics of our group negatively?

Note the cycle of wisdom here. The wise person welcomes reproof and grows wiser, and becomes more open to reproof, and becomes wiser still. Contrast that with the "scoffer" who thinks he has all the answers. He will send subtle signals that he is not interested in feedback, and will quickly become defensive if it is offered.

We see the deceptiveness of sin and the liberating role of reproof very clearly in the dark chapter of David's life, after he had seized Bathsheba, gotten her pregnant, and had her husband Uriah killed after failing in his attempts to cover it up. For a period of at least nine months from the initial sin David was stuck in his sin and guilt, experiencing nothing of the intimacy with God that had characterized so much of his life.

So we come to 2 Sam. 12:1, where "the Lord sent Nathan to David." David was so intensely imprisoned in a black hole of sin and self-deception that he needed someone else's help to set him free. So God called on Nathan, the prophet in whom David had long trusted, for the task. But even then Nathan could not approach the topic directly with David, because David was not at a season in his life where he was living wisely and would welcome counsel. So Nathan had to come in through a "back door", by means of a story.

A rich man had a large number of livestock. A poor man had only one lamb that grew up in his house with his children and was like a daughter to him. When the rich man needed to prepare a meal for a visiting traveler, rather than taking an animal from his huge holdings, he took the poor man's lamb to kill for the meal. (2 Sam. 12:1-4, paraphrase)

We see David's response in verse 5, he "burned with anger" at the rich man's action. Could there be any more compelling evidence of the deceptiveness of sin? From our outside, objective perspective we're saying, "it's you, dummy, can't you see it?", but he couldn't. It is so apparent in someone else's life, but so hard to see in our own. Thus our desperate need for others to help us see truth, and sometimes even to see it in a story before we can make the connection to our own life situation.

Nathan makes the application in v.7, "you are the man!" This is your sin, David. And David responds, v. 13a, "I have sinned against the Lord." He comes to the place of repentance, which then led to restored intimacy with God.

My Story

This episode in David's life brings to my mind another story of the deceitfulness and destruction of sin and God's gracious deliverance. I was blessed with the opportunity to sit under an extensive amount of good Bible teaching during my college years, and received numerous teaching and leadership opportunities in my twenties. And I had experienced one blessing after another in life, growing up in a good family situation, experiencing success in school and career, not encountering any major adversity. Life was working great for me.

Through all this I became a proud and self-righteous person. I thought I had all the answers for how to make life work and was judgmental toward others who didn't "have it together" as I thought I did. Though I had no idea at the time, I had become a card carrying Pharisee. Self-righteous people are hardest on the people closest to them. So you can imagine I was a very difficult husband to live with, which was taking a big toll on my lovely bride Brenda and on our marriage.

Like David I was hard-hearted and deceived and would not welcome reproof. So God had to come via a "back door" to get through to me also. In my case it was a small group Brenda and I joined with three other couples who were good friends. Unbeknownst to me going in, it was a different kind of group than I had ever been in before, one where people were genuine and talked openly about personal failures and marital conflicts.

When the discussion turned to our marriage I explained to the group the problems we were having and the ways Brenda needed to change. All the other couples disagreed and instead were calling me to change. At first I thought it must be a problem with my communication, I must be not explaining things well enough, so I tried again, but they all continued to speak with almost one voice challenging me to change.

Over the course of many, many months, God used the involvement and collective words of these friends to begin to break through the hardness of heart and self-righteousness and self-deception I had built up over years, to help me understand I was in profound need of change at the deepest levels of my heart.

One of the greatest gifts we can give one another is to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). If we are not inviting our brothers and sisters to speak truth in love to us, we are greatly underestimating the deceptiveness of sin. We are placing far too much confidence in our perspectives of ourselves and how we impact and relate to others, and we are setting ourselves up for potentially greater failure down the road.

Conclusion

There is a massive salvage effort currently underway on the wreckage of the Costa Concordia. It is a \$400M undertaking that has literally been worked around the clock seven days and nights a week for months now, continuing until sometime next summer. It is a race against time, seeking to remove the ship before storms break it apart and cause irreparable damage to the environmentally sensitive marine park and coral reef where it currently sets off the coast of Tuscany.

The challenge of rolling a 60,000 ton ship filled with thousands more tons of seawater into an upright position has turned into the most complicated, the most expensive, the most daunting and the riskiest salvage operation ever. It involves an engineering strategy that has never been tried before on this scale. It requires building a massive underwater platform on which the upright ship will rest.

To create the necessary buoyancy they are in effect welding a new ship onto the exposed side of the wrecked ship. On the day they are ready the engineers will have one hit-or-miss shot to roll the ship into an upright position in one piece, so that it can then be floated away to a dry dock in Sicily where it can be safely cut up for scrap.

As Christians we can take tremendous encouragement in the fact that God is the ultimate salvage engineer. He has been doing it ever since He pronounced ultimate redemption to Adam and Eve after their sin in the Garden. He has done it in the lives of David and Peter, in my life, and I expect in many of yours.

His track record at bringing His good purposes to pass in spite of our sin is unblemished. No wreckage is too massive for His redeeming power, He never runs out of time, His strategies never fail, and He never gives up on His "projects." God often works most powerfully in our lives in times of greatest disruption.

Todd Havekost