

How to Avoid Spiritual Shipwreck

If you want to make it through life without a moral failure, you must be sure to close every door the devil could enter.

Years ago, on March 6, 1987, the Herald of Free Enterprise sank just outside Zeebrugge harbor in Belgium. 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 U.K.

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

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

As I watched a TV documentary about the disaster, God began to speak to me about 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 was responsible for setting sail with the bow doors open. The crew was responsible for not closing the doors in time. The victims who died were innocent bystanders of an avoidable drama.

We all are individually responsible for the ships of our lives. If we are sailing with the bow doors open, it's possible nothing untoward will happen for a long time. There

is little danger when the waters are smooth.

But complacency and pride can make us careless in our conduct. And when the unthinkable happens, it's not only the individual who suffers; all the "passengers" who were depending on him for their well-being are in danger of becoming victims.

Those passengers include our families, colleagues, employees, and all who look to us for spiritual input and care at various levels of church life. For a pastor or Christian ministry leader, the passengers include his congregation, staff and even the wider body of Christ. When the disaster hits a high-profile Christian leader, the ripple effect can create a tsunami.

Many of those I have prayed with experienced some form of shipwreck because they had been sailing through life with their bow doors wide open. For some, disaster came in the form 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 that had been left open years before had never been closed.

The enemy will use anything in our lives that is out of harmony with God's covenant of blessing—that is, the Ten Commandments—to cause us to "list." Consistent breaking any one of these commandments, which represent God's best for us, "opens our bow doors" and leaves us vulnerable to disaster.

There may be reasons in a believer's past—such as abuse or various forms of parental damage—for a particular sin's being out of control. But confessing the sin and receiving healing for the cause of it is far better than wrestling on one's own to close a seemingly immovable bow door that has been jammed open.

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 every church's life. It is the unhealed areas of our lives that leave us vulnerable to being overwhelmed by 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.

But the history of Christian ministry is, sadly, punctuated by disasters that occurred because people sailed through life with their bow doors open—and the more senior and highly visible the people were, the greater the disasters. 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 the ferry disaster was totally avoidable, so are most of the spiritual disasters that give the enemy leverage in the body of Christ. All that is required to close bow doors and begin the journey toward healing are humility, openness and honesty.

Pride says: "I can never own up to this or that sin; it would not be edifying. I could never let anyone know what I'm really like on the inside." Pride also insists, "Keep sailing even though the bow doors are open." But humility demands, "Get the doors closed before there is a disaster!"

A Christian leader I know reached a point at which he could no longer cope with the pressures of his calling, so he cut himself off from service in the body of Christ. Then he heard that God had restored a colleague in one of our schools.

When he came to us for ministry, he 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 he was successful for only so long. The enemy

was robbing him of his destiny.

Today he is healed, restored and back on the front line. The bow door that the enemy had used to try to flood him is now truly closed.

There are many disasters waiting to happen in the body of Christ—people who are allowing water to seep in through open bow doors. Those disasters can be avoided.

But we have to realize that not all the problems a person has in this life are 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 only the beginning of a journey of discipleship.

The name of the vessel that sank 20 years ago was Herald of Free Enterprise. God wants each one of us to enter the fullness of His destiny for our lives. 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 "take heed to yourself and to the doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:16, NKJV), then we will only give the enemy opportunity to one day sink the vessel.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2), he was speaking to those who already knew the Lord. In the New Testament the word "salvation" refers not only to entering the kingdom of God but also to the healing and deliverance of those who are already in the kingdom.

Since 1987 more than 3,000 people have died in roll-on, roll-off ferry disasters because the lessons of earlier disasters were not learned and applied by the crews of other vessels. Now is the day for getting our lives in order and closing all the bow doors we may have in our lives. Days of testing, in which the waters may not be calm, are coming. We must take

action now to close all doors open to the enemy and avoid more disasters in the body of Christ.

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