

WHEN THE SOUTH WIND BLOWS SOFTLY

"And when the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, loosing thence, they sailed close by Crete. But not long after there arose against it a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon" (Acts 27:13-14).

I am told that the most dangerous part of a hurricane is its eye. For in the eye of a hurricane there is a complete calm. When word goes out that a hurricane is approaching, determined men and women batten down the hatches, board up the windows, put in a stock of provisions, gather the family indoors, and ride out the storm. Rain falls in torrents, and the wind howls and shrieks. Then suddenly there is a great calm.

Those inexperienced in such things think the danger is passed. Leaving the security of their homes they relax their preparedness, and go about life as usual. Then without warning the back side of the storm strikes. And they are unprepared to face its fury. Many people have been destroyed because of the delusion of calm in a hurricane's eye.

Life is like that. Its greatest danger is not in the storm but in the calm. More men are destroyed by prosperity than by adversity. Someone has said, "Beware of the easy road -- it always leads down."

When adversity comes there is something of the heroic in man's soul which enables him to prevail. But in times of ease he relaxes and falls easy prey to the furtive dangers which lurk about him. This is especially true in the realm of the moral and spiritual. And when we fail there we fail everywhere.

Oliver Goldsmith adorns this truth in poetic dress when he says,

"Ill fares the land, and to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay."

Acts 27 is the most accurate and complete account of ancient seafaring on record. The navigation of the Mediterranean Sea in Paul's day was suspended, in large measure, during the winter months. The larger ships, which carried the grain from Egypt to Italy, continued in business some longer. Even with the large ships, it took expert seamanship to carry them against the rising winds and turbulent seas.

In this danger period the ship was safely anchored in a small port called "The Fair Havens." Just forty miles away was the more commodious port at Phenice on Crete. The captain of the ship proposed that they plan to winter there, but Paul counseled against it. The centurion, who was in command, heeded the captain. So the Bible says, "when the south wind blew softly" they tried to make it to Crete. But, suddenly a northeast gale swept down on them, resulting ultimately in the loss of both cargo and ship.

I. The Delusion.

"And when the south wind blew softly" suggests a time of prosperity and ease. Despite our troubled times, we are living in an era of prosperity and ease. Surely for us the south wind blows softly.

But this "south wind" is one of our greatest dangers today. For it serves to delude us into a sense of false security. Free people have girded themselves against the blustering boasts of Communism. And it is well that they have done so. But to regard our enemies as being only some far-away, foreign-speaking, God-denying people is only a part of the picture. The most insidious peril that we face is the sense of ease and well-being within our own nation.

In our scripture lesson we learn that the mariners of the ship fell victim to what one has called the "snare of the south wind." They were safe in port. But it was a small, out-of-the-way port. They desired the more commodious port on Crete. They thought

that with its entertainment and excitement it would be a better place in which to spend the winter. And despite the warnings of Paul, the servant of God, "when the south wind blew softly," they set sail for it.

All of this is very suggestive to us. Man is ever resentful of the restrictions placed upon him by God's moral law. He desires what he calls freedom. And this rebellion is most evident in times of material prosperity. When the south wind blows softly, man dares to venture from his port of moral security to reach for the forbidden fruit which grows on some near-by island.

Notice the sequence of events. "When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, loosing thence, they sailed close by Crete." When prosperity comes we think that we have obtained our purpose. We have arrived. We are in command of the situation. Who needs God anyway? Are not we doing all right by ourselves? So casting God aside we venture out on our own. They were anchored safely in Fair Havens, but when they felt the "south wind" they pulled up their moorings.

Thank God, there is a moral authority to rule our conduct. It is the voice of God spoken in the Ten Commandments. This moral code is the anchor of moral conduct for men and nations. And our generation is not the first to pull up this anchor and to throw it away. Nor will it be the first to perish in so doing. The Ten Commandments express the very moral structure of the universe. We may say that we break the Ten Commandments. Not so. We are broken on them when we defy them. This is true of individuals and of nations. You can no more run past the Ten Commandments than you can run past the stars.

And whether the south wind blows softly or the north winds howls and shrieks, that man or nation who pulls up this anchor to moral character is sailing into a stormy, destructive sea.

II. The Destruction.

"But not long after there arose against it a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon."

This was a northeast wind, cold and blustery, churning the sea like a bowl of water. Yes, the south winds are always followed by the wintry gale, and so often without any warning.

The ship was not prepared to face such a blow. The anchor lay neglected on the deck. They did not even have time to lower the mainsail. So much at ease were they that their emergency rescue boat had been left trailing behind the ship. Oh, the mariners worked hard and valiantly once the gale struck. They drew in the boat, lowered the sail, and undergirded the frail ship with large ropes and chains. But, after having done so, their fears were not allayed. Speedily they set sail, and again were driven by a merciless sea. The next day, thinking they would relieve the situation, they tossed the freight overboard. But still the wind blew, and the ship was driven before the tempest. For days they did not see the sun or the stars by which to navigate. They were lost on a stormy sea. All were alarmed as to their personal safety, except Paul and his companions. Luke said, "All hope that we should be saved was then taken away."

It is not necessary for us to dwell long on the spiritual application of these facts. For they have been illustrated times without number in the life of men and of nations. Life is filled with the snare of the south wind. But it has its stormy gales as well. Any perusal of history reveals this truth. Nations are born and achieve greatness through toil and trial. But they are enervated by the soft winds of prosperity. They forget God. And then Euroclydon! The ship is battered and torn, and its cargo is lost. And a once mighty nation with white sails in the breeze of history becomes but a few broken boards floating on the sea of time.

But what about you as a person? The south wind of prosperity blows softly in your

face. You have a good job and a fine family. You enjoy good health. If you are a young person, you may be popular with your set. Or, you may be a man of character and prominence in your community. Surely life is beautiful and easy. What more could you want? But even these things can be a snare. Little by little you compromise your moral principles. Now and then you take a social drink. You pull a shady deal occasionally and make a fast dollar here and there. Little by little the south wind rounds off the edges of God's Law. What harm is there in it? Life is easy, and everything is just fine.

And then comes Euroclydon! Moral standards have fallen. You find yourself an alcoholic. You lose your job. What was once a happy home is now a ruined husband, a heartbroken wife a shattered family, and tearful, confused children. A once popular young man is now living in disgrace. A character which you spent a lifetime in building was blasted by one blow of the storm. Health has been wasted, hope has been blasted, the whole cargo of your life has been dumped overboard, and the wreckage of your life floats aimlessly on a sea once again quiet in the aftermath of the storm. And all because you listened as the south wind blew softly.

Does this sound fantastic to you? It should not, because these are the tragic facts of life. If your eyes could pierce the masks upon the faces of many people whom you know, you would see stark tragedy. That is due to the fact that they were deluded by the soft south wind, and were not prepared for the blowing gale.

III. The Deliverance.

Is there any hope for those who have made shipwreck of their faith and life? Yes, there is.

In the darkest hour of their experience, which was during that terrible storm, Paul said: "Sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it will be even as it was told me." Thus in their most trying hour God's man spoke of deliverance.

Indeed, had they listened to Paul in the first place, they could have avoided the storm and its destruction. But the south winds blew softly, and they considered the preacher just a kill-joy. Nevertheless, in their hour of despair the preacher came with a message of hope. When the counsels of worldly-wise men come to naught, when voluntary and commercialized sin have done their worst, it is the preacher who must pick up the broken pieces and try to put them together again. And this is true whether the victim be a person, a home, or society.

What was Paul's message in that dark hour? It was just plain, old-fashioned faith in God. He said, "I believe God." Paul believed God in spite of the dangers that faced him. His faith stopped a panic. It gave others confidence and hope in a desperate situation. The men on that ship were saved for Paul's sake. The inference is clear that God works by divine decree. It was His plan to save these men. It was not their plan at all.

When the ship finally broke up, these men were cast into the sea. Some swam to the shore, but those who could not swim got to shore by clinging to boards or pieces of the ship. Even these boards were made to serve the purpose of God. What a contrast to that which the snare of the south wind promised! Instead of coming into port with full sails in the breeze amid laughter and singing, they came limping in as a broken band of men. Oh, they were delivered, but what a loss!

So, I come to you with your only message of hope. Have faith in God! What is done is done. Let the past be the past. Learn from it, but do not dwell on it. Recognizing your failure, come to the Lord confessing your sins, and trusting in Jesus as your Saviour. Do not think that you can sail into port on the broken ship of self-reliance.

Instead float to safety on the plank of God's free grace. Throw overboard your cargo of so-called good works, and float to glory on the plank of free grace. That is your only hope regardless of how good or how bad you may be. For we are saved by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves. It is of God.

Once you have received Christ as your Saviour, whether the south wind blows softly or you are beaten upon by the stormy gale, you have an anchor safe and sure. This is true because your soul is anchored in God's fair Haven of Rest.