

WRECK OF THE TITANIC

**Why did it
happen ?**

BY

Rev. BENJAMIN J. GIBBON.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

BRISTOL:

RANKIN BROS. LTD., Printers, Trenchard Street.

1912.

In Memoriam.

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A Sermon delivered at Old King Street Baptist Chapel, Bristol, on Sunday Evening, April 28th, 1912, by Rev. BENJAMIN J. GIBBON.



SHOULD deem myself lacking in my duty if I did not take this first opportunity to turn your thoughts to the shipwreck of the *Titanic* last Sunday week, and to try to draw its lessons.

It is a catastrophe that has profoundly impressed two continents. There has never been such a disaster at sea. Hardly any calamity of modern times is to be compared with it in magnitude. Some earthquakes and volcanic eruptions have destroyed more lives, but they have rarely come so closely home to the English and American peoples. It is the Anglo-Saxon race that is now bereaved. Everybody seems to have known someone, or to have been connected in some way with someone, who was on board. A member of

this Church, whom I baptised and admitted to fellowship, but who left us on her marriage, was there with her husband, though I rejoice that her name, Mrs. Ware, is in the list of the saved—but alone! Another passenger, Mr. Frederick Shellard, was at our last Young People's Social and the previous service. He was a Bristolian who had emigrated, and was home for a holiday. I had some pleasant conversation with him, and he impressed me as a fine Christian man. He nearly persuaded one of our members, now present, to return with him on the *Titanic*. To-day Frederick Shellard's body lies in the unquiet grave of the Atlantic.

I raise the question, Why did it happen? I put the question in that form. I do not ask, Why did God do it? I do not believe God did it. The causes that brought about the loss of the *Titanic* were human, not divine. But God permitted the terrible effect to follow from those causes, once set in operation. "There's a Divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will." Men rough-hewed the ill-fated voyage, and God shaped the end accordingly—that is all you can say. So God did not do it: He permitted it. But why did He not intervene to prevent it? Why did He allow it to happen? I hope the question will not sound presumptuous. I raise it simply because the event itself has raised it and many are in genuine perplexity because of it. Can God be good, and allow such a calamity to take place? If He is good, surely He cannot be as great as He is good, or He would have prevented it! That is the dilemma every such catastrophe seems to present, and not a few are speechless before it. And I discuss the question, too, in order to rebut some false inferences that are being widely drawn. Well, why did it happen? I answer, first—

IT IS NOT TO BE INTERPRETED AS A DIVINE
JUDGMENT ON THE VICTIMS.

That is being said. Here was a ship full of millionaires. A dozen of the wealthiest men in America were on board—and to some "wealthiest" is synonymous with "wickedest." Among them was one who was being denounced a few weeks ago by all the pulpits and papers in the United States as a shameless adulterer. Also, when the collision occurred, although it was a Sunday night, some were tarrying over the wine, and others playing cards. Surely the iceberg that struck the ship and sank her was a thunderbolt from the hand of an angry God! But no! with emphasis I say it, this wreck is *not* to be interpreted as a Divine judgment on the victims. I say that without hesitation, because it is the teaching of Jesus. "Suppose ye," He said, "that the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices were sinners above all the Galileans? I tell you, Nay. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and slew them, suppose ye that they were sinners above all that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay." So in our Lord's time calamity was interpreted as punishment, just as it is still. It seems a kind of instinct in human nature to see in the unfortunate, the wicked; and in misfortune, the wrath of heaven. But it is not so. God's judgments are not so simple, not so swift, not so easily interpreted. So Jesus taught; and so His ambassadors must teach to-day. This wreck was not a visitation of Divine wrath upon the victims.

Consider how cruel that theory is. There were two ministers on board—probably more, but two whose names were known to me—the Rev. E. C. Carter, rector of White-chapel, and the Rev. John Harper, pastor of Walworth Road

Baptist Church, London. But another well-known minister, the Rev. E. Stuart Holden, had also booked his passage, but was compelled to cancel it at the last moment, owing to the illness of his wife. Was he a holier man than his brothers who perished? You dare not suggest it. But that is the logical deduction from the judgment theory. In that case, too, those who escaped must have been worthier than those who perished, since they were preserved in the judgment that befell those. Can you believe it? But there was no truer soldier of Christ on all the seven seas that night than William T. Stead, the great journalist, the hero of a hundred fights for righteousness, a knight-errant if you will, but a warrior of God. Yet he was drowned, while some who by comparison were nonentities, to say no more, were saved. No! The theory that this was a Divine judgment is a cowardly calumny on the heroic dead, a cruel outrage of their living relatives, and really a piece of subtle Pharisaism on the part of those who suggest it, for it implies that they are holier than those who have been taken. It is a false theory, which, on the authority of the Master, we nail to the counter.

But, in the second place, I venture to say of this disaster—
IT MAY WELL BE REGARDED AS A WHOLESOME
HUMILIATION OF MATERIALISTIC PRIDE.

Leaving out individuals entirely, and regarding the disaster broadly as a lesson addressed to our age—and *all* events are lessons!—I say it may well be considered as a wholesome rebuke of materialistic pride. This *Titanic* was the largest ship ever built by man. She was the most luxuriously appointed liner that ever sailed the seas. She was a floating palace. Two sets of cabins were let at £870 each—£870 for the single trip. The *Titanic* was the last word in human

ship-building skill. She was the final product of man's long conflict with the elements. In her, it was confidently boasted, the elements had been conquered—the *Titanic* was unsinkable. On this maiden trip all records were expected to be broken. That Sunday night an enthusiastic company in the saloon filled their wine glasses and drank "To the mighty *Titanic*!" . . . And, lo, an iceberg grazed her side—with no more noise than the faint boom of cannon which fell on the ears of the dancers in the ball-room of Brussels and announced Waterloo—and within four hours this incarnate boast of human skill, luxury and speed, was sinking through two miles of icy water to the bottom of the Atlantic, with sixteen hundred souls aboard her. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

This line of thought is almost irresistibly suggested by the name of the unfortunate ship—the *Titanic*. And who were the Titans? The classical equivalent of the Babel-builders of the Bible—gigantic men, who in their self-sufficiency and contempt of God strove to build a tower that should reach to heaven, until God came down and confounded them. One thinks, too, of Nebuchadnezzar, strutting in his hour of pride upon his palace roof, and boasting, "Is not this great Babylon that I have builded?"—and in that hour driven forth among the beasts; of Belshazzar at his impious feast—and the handwriting that stood out on the wall; of Herod boasting himself a god—and being smitten with worms; and of the invincible Armada that was to humble English Protestantism—and its fate. As the "invincible" Armada was scattered by the winds of God, and sunk, so the "unsinkable" *Titanic* was shattered by an iceberg of God, and sunk.

It is precarious to draw such morals, I know; but the

Titanic was so typical of the age that produced her that I do not hesitate. This ship was an absolute symbol of her age—a perfect incarnation of the spirit of the times. It is an age of luxury ; an age of speed ; an age of pleasure ; an age of pride ; an age of boasting in materialistic triumphs ; an age of forgetfulness of God. And, therefore, it may well be that this fearful disaster was allowed as a wholesome humiliation of vainglorious materialism. It was not a judgment of the victims. Perhaps they died for us—died as our substitutes—died to save our modern world—died “lest we forget” still further our utter weakness and our entire dependence on God.

I am moved to say of this tragic event, in the third place—
IT IS A REMINDER THAT GOD WILL NOT INTER-
VENE BETWEEN MEN AND THE OPERATION
OF LAWS THEY TRIFLE WITH.

I would not speak wildly, but it is well within the mark to say that the investigation proceeding in America is revealing what ordinary people must regard as extreme carelessness in the management of such vessels. There seems to have been a whole tissue of blunders. She was too far north for the season, when icebergs are floating down from Greenland ; but the course is shorter, so she risked it. She had been warned of the proximity of icebergs, but travelled at her top speed. It is actually reported that icebergs were sighted, but that the speed was not reduced. Then the men on watch in the crow's-nest complain that they were not supplied with glasses, although they asked for them before they started. And there were not boats enough to accommodate more than a third of the crowded human life on board. All these risks were lightly taken in the interests

of greater luxury, and increased speed. I do not suggest that any one is to blame. No individual is to blame. But the system is to blame. The general carelessness is greatly to blame. Yet is it any wonder, now we know what chances were taken and what risks run, that the catastrophe happened? The only marvel is that it has not happened earlier and oftener. God will not intervene to save men from the consequences of their own folly. God will not work a miracle to prevent the operation of laws men lightly defy. It is in wisdom that He will not.

It is in mercy that He will not. For what is the consequence of this disaster? Such things will not happen again in our time. There will be greater care in the future. Many more lives will be saved through the shipwreck of the *Titanic* than were lost in it. Again they died for the race, that others might live.

But let us pause a moment to apply to ourselves this thought, that God will not intervene to save men from the operation of laws they defy. How many are saying, We can live as we please, and all will be well with us in the next world! How many, if they do not say it, are acting on that principle! But is it justified? Does the wreck of the *Titanic* bear out that easy optimism? Indeed, it does not. It is a startling reminder to us that God is a God of law. Causes are followed inexorably by their due and proper effects. "Whatsoever a man soweth, *that* shall he also reap."

Let us see the disaster now in a brighter light—

IT IS A SPLENDID REVELATION OF THE POSSIBILITIES OF HUMAN NATURE.

They died, who died, like heroes. One or two insignificant

exceptions there doubtless were, but on the whole they died like heroes. Take the officials. Begin with Phillips, the wireless operator. See him at his post, hour after hour, sending out messages of distress "Help! Help!! Hurry! Hurry!!" continuing after the captain had told him he had done his duty and might leave and look after himself, staying and working until the failure of the machinery threw his gear out of operation, and then dying of exhaustion and cold. "He saved others: himself he could not save." Think of the firemen, knowing their fate better than any, but continuing to work in their iron coffin, and not one of them surviving; and of the letter-sorters, devoted to the salvation of the mails, bringing up bag after bag, and dying all four of them. And then there is Captain Smith—a sailor of the true British breed—staying on the bridge to the last, and when the waters swirled around him, taking up his megaphone and shouting a last message to the doomed hundreds, "Be British!"

The passengers, too, were worthy of such leadership. "Women and children first!" was the order; and the men quietly stood by, and saw the boats filled and rowed away into the darkness, leaving them to their fate. Wealth was no passport in that dread hour. Millionaires died like poor men, and—to their credit—made no attempt to buy life. The two who paid £870 each for their cabins perished. There was Colonel Astor, the man who had been denounced by the unanimous voices of the pulpit and press of America, showing himself a hero. His young bride was put into a boat, and because no woman was near, he was invited to step in too. He did. At that moment a woman came up, and he stepped back. "Women first," he said, and coolly lighted a

cigarette. "Good-bye, dearie; we shall meet again." They never did. Nor were the men alone heroic. There were women who would not be parted from those they loved. Mrs. Isidor Straus was one. They tried to put her into a boat; but "No," she said, clinging to her husband. "We're old people, Isidor. We've been together forty years, and we won't be parted now." Nor were they. They died, the old wife in her old husband's arms. "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it." "Love is strong as death."

I hesitate to speak of the band, in their utter nobleness. Led by young Hartley—only thirty-four years old—a Methodist—they played light airs, to quiet the fears of the passengers, until the end. Then they struck up, "Nearer, my God, to Thee." There has been nothing like it—save once, sixty years ago, when the troopship *Birkenhead* went down off the African coast. All the boats were filled with women and children then also, according to the chivalrous British rule. "Now let the men save themselves!" shouted the captain. But "No!" cried a military officer. "If they do they'll swamp the boats. Let the men fall in on deck!" And they did—lined up as if on the parade ground—and went down, every soldier in his place in the ranks, and firing their own funeral salute. How noble! How heroic! But I think the *Titanic* band has given the world a yet nobler and even more heroic story. It requires more self-command to play an instrument than to fire a gun; it is a great thing to die uncomplainingly, but it is a greater to die ministering to the consolation of others. But that is what they did who on that stricken ship played until the swirling waters choked their instruments, and went down playing

" Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.

E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,
Still all my song shall be,
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee."

The wreck of the *Titanic* has enriched history. It has given us a new conception of the splendid possibilities of human nature. What courage; what unselfishness; what self-sacrifice; what heroism, poor fallen humanity is yet capable of, thank God! One may be humbly proud of his kind. I begin not to wonder that God loved men, and sent His only-begotten Son to be their Saviour. Made a little lower than angels, and still exhibiting qualities that deserve to be called angelic, He could not see them perish in their sins; and gave His Son for a world undone.

Also, this outburst of moral heroism suggests to me that other qualities may have shone forth with equal splendour, and that the hour of their tragic death may well have been the time of their spiritual awakening to multitudes. Do you ask me, Where now are those sixteen hundred and thirty-five that found a watery grave? I answer, I would fain hope, for the overwhelming majority, that they are with God. Colonel Gracie, of the United States Army, rose to the surface after the awful plunge, and managed to get upon a raft, with many others. The water was up to their knees, and only those who stood throughout the night survived. And all through those fearful hours, he tells us, every man on the raft prayed incessantly. They repeated the Lord's Prayer over and over; and some, whose lips had evidently been long unused to prayer, said the prayers they had learned as

children at their mothers' knees. Well, don't you think those on the vessel also prayed—prayed as probably many of us have never prayed yet? And that God heard them? They had four hours between the collision with the iceberg and the sinking of the ship. That was longer than the dying thief had on Calvary. Surely they found space for repentance too, hundreds of them! And I know the same pitiful Lord was near them; waiting for the cry, "Lord, remember me!" and ready with His answer, "*To-day* thou shalt be with Me in Paradise." There is an inscription on the tombstone of one who perished in the hunting field,

"Betwixt the stirrup and the ground,
I mercy sought; I mercy found."

It is quite possible. "There is *life for a look* at the Crucified One." Let us hope that many gave that look, and found that life, in the hour of their physical death—and leave them so.

A very commonplace lesson you may think my last, but I am certain it is taught by this disaster.—

IT IS A LESSON IN THE TRANSITORINESS OF
PHYSICAL LIFE, AND THE ABIDING VALUE OF
SPIRITUAL LIFE.

"Brief life is here our portion." It is given us just as our opportunity to develop and cultivate spiritual life, which alone endures. And the invitation to us to enter upon that life is urgent, because "the time is short." "We know not what a day may bring forth." "There is but a step betwixt us and death."

I cannot forget that I was urging this lesson a fortnight ago—the very Sunday night the *Titanic* went down. Preaching from the text "He prophesieth of the times that are far

off," I combated it, and said that eternal realities were *not* far off, but that any moment might usher us into their midst. I did not know the fearful illustration my words were to have. But, as a fact, that gay ship-load of twenty-three hundreds were face to face with death while I spoke, and within a few hours the majority of them had passed the veil. Perhaps you thought little of my words. But you *have* thought—millions have thought—of the illustration. And perhaps that is one reason why God permitted it. Men are dying all the time. More have died since we have been gathered here than perished on the *Titanic*. But when people die in their beds, one by one, we fail to read the lesson. But when it is read for us, on this tremendous scale, we cannot choose but hear. A servant girl I met in London last week said, "This wreck makes us think of our souls." I repeat, perhaps therefore God permitted it. Again, in another sense, they died that we might live. Will you not act on the lesson, brother? sister? you who need it? Make your peace with God, through Jesus Christ His Son, now—now, while you have life and opportunity, gifts that may be withdrawn you know not how soon. "Behold *now* is the acceptable time; behold *now* is the day of salvation."

For when you have entered upon the spiritual life, death is robbed of its terrors. Let it come soon, let it come late; let it come swiftly, let it come gradually; let it come on land, let it come at sea—and it is all one. In no case can it harm you. Your true life is "hid with Christ in God." Death does but set you free to go to be with "Him whom having not seen you love." The spiritual life alone is important. Soul only counts. How is it with your soul? The first intimation of the disaster I saw was a placard, "2,000

souls saved by wireless." It was a ghastly mistake, as we now know, and was then rectified to "1,600 souls lost." But, no! *Souls* are not lost by shipwreck—only by sin; and *souls* are not saved by wireless—only by Jesus Christ. Over the soul and its true life the accidents that harm the body have no power. I imagine that some went down smiling at the icebergs and the ice-cold waves, while they murmured the words of Jesus, "Fear not them that kill the body, *and after that have no more that they can do.*" And above the awful cry which rose when the doomed vessel took the final plunge, I do not doubt that the angels distinguished more than one voice singing under its breath—

"Jesu, Lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide
Till the storm of life is past;
Safe into the haven guide;
O receive my soul at last!"

How about yourself, my dear friend? Are you also ready? Do not ignore this solemn lesson to us all. "Why not to-night?" There was no room in the lifeboats for those sixteen hundred people, but there is room in God's ark of salvation, blessed be His name! for us all. If wireless telegraphy brought rescue to seven hundred on that ship, surely you can believe that your prayer to the unseen Christ, "Lord, save me!" will bring salvation swift to you. "Saved, my God! saved," a lady cried at the White Star office in London when the name her eyes burned to see at length stood out on the list of the rescued. "Saved, my God, saved"—of whom may that be said to-night?