

The Wind of God and the Sails of Faith

by Tom Macartney

Tom Macartney's sermon emphasizes the balance between divine provision and human cooperation in the Christian life, illustrated through the metaphor of a ship's sails filled by the wind of God.

Scripture: Mark 11:22, Luke 17:5, Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 3:10, Galatians 2:20, Philippians 2:12, Colossians 1:29, 2 Timothy 2:3

Topics: "Faith And Works", "Divine Providence"

Description

Tom Macartney emphasizes the importance of understanding the various illustrations in the New Testament that depict the Christian life, such as the athlete, soldier, builder, farmer, and ship in full sail. He highlights the balance between divine provision and human response, where Christians are called to actively cooperate with God's total provision in Christ. Using the analogy of a ship in full sail, he explains that believers are to be borne along by the limitless power of God, maintaining high the sails of faith to allow God to carry them forward to their heavenly destination.

Transcript

In the New Testament there are many pictures illustrating the Christian life, each of which contributes something to our understanding of it. We have the athlete in the games, the soldier on active service, the builder concerned to build on a firm foundation with good materials; the farmer working for a rich harvest, and so on.

The point we need to observe most carefully in these pictures is the close link between the divine provision and energy and the human response and activity. It is God who provides the athlete's strength and prowess, the soldier's armour and ability to fight, the builder with a solid foundation and good materials, and the farmer with good seed and skill. And yet each must use His provision. The Christian must learn to use and co-operate with God's total provision for him in Christ.

Now we tend to overemphasise either the divine or the human side so that the Christian life becomes either one of passivity in which God does everything as we allow Him to, or one of activity in which we do everything with a helping hand from God. Neither of these represents the New Testament view.

If we take the picture of the runner in Hebrews 12:1, 2 and elsewhere, we must not imagine that we are to run in our own energy. A Christian does everything in the strength of Christ. Paul says, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me," and that he is, "Striving according to his working, who works in me mightily."

Paul gives us the true picture. He is living positively in the strength of Christ; the life and energy of Christ is expressing itself in the activity of Paul. It is a picture of total dependence and active co-operation. And it is the difficulty we have in achieving the delicate balance between these two that accounts for many of our problems and failures.

One of the most helpful yet little known pictures we have in the New Testament is of a ship in full sail, which is suggested by a number of passages. In Hebrews 6:1 we have this idea though it is hidden in most English translations. These give the impression that we are to press on to maturity, whereas the word means that we are to be borne along, something quite different. One of the great commentaries puts it like this: "The form of this positive charge is remarkable. The thought is not primarily of personal effort, 'let us go on, let us press,' but of personal surrender to an active influence. The power is working: we have only to yield ourselves to it. At the same time the influence and the surrender are continuous, and not (under this aspect) concentrated in one momentary crisis. The goal of this forward movement is perfection, the full maturity of spiritual growth and the teaching which corresponds with maturity." The idea is clear: the power is working, we have only to yield ourselves to it. A Christian's life and progress is simply a matter of co-operating with the limitless power of God.

This same verb occurs in Hebrews 1:3, where Christ is said to be, "Upholding, maintaining, guiding and propelling the universe by His mighty word of power" (Amplified Bible). It occurs also in Acts 2:2: "And suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind". It occurs in Acts 27:15, 17 in the story of the great storm in which Paul's ship was driven by the gale-force wind. It occurs in 2 Peter 1:21, where we read that the prophets of old were moved, or borne along, by the Holy Spirit. The power is working, the wind is blowing, we have only to avail ourselves of it.

So we get this picture of the Christian life as of a ship in full sail, being borne along to its heavenly destination by the wind of God. Should this not take the strain and tension out of our lives? God will carry us forward to the goal as we yield ourselves to Him. And what is our part? To hoist our sails and keep them up.

In Hebrews 10:38, 39 we have a nautical word which shows the importance of keeping high the sails of faith: "My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to loss, but of those who have faith to the gaining of the soul." The original idea in this word is that of taking in or shortening sail in prospect of a storm, and so it comes to mean to draw in, to exercise caution or reserve. So Peter diplomatically drew back from his former stand in Galatians 2:12 when the situation became difficult, whereas Paul did not shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God to the Ephesians in Acts 20:20, 27. He did not trim his ministry to suit popular demand. Would that we had more Pauls and fewer Peters today. We must learn never to shorten sail. Our part is to keep the sails of faith high at all times so that the wind of God can fill them and carry us forward. Sometimes the wind may really blow but usually it will be a steady breeze. The important thing is for us to keep our sails up; God will do the rest in His own way. Even when we seem becalmed, the imperceptible movement of the sea of life will carry us forward under God's sovereign hand. But whatever we do, we must not take in sail, we must not shrink back in unbelief. To do so can only result in spiritual loss. We shall get nowhere and start drifting, perhaps on to the rocks. The way onward to our great goal, conformity to the image of God's Son, is that of faith.

Now keeping our sails of faith high is a matter of the will. Our sails must be set and kept in position. Here is where we often go wrong. We think that God is expecting us to produce faith, to make our own sails so

to speak, whereas He provides everything, even the strength to set the sails. But He must have the co-operation of our wills, because we are moral beings. We underestimate the important part the human will, subject to Christ, plays in the Christian life. Instead of crying, "Lord, increase our faith", as we often do when the seas roll high, we ought simply to set our sails and trust Him. In Christ we have all the faith we need to do God's will. Frequently what is needed is an act of our wills. "Have faith in God." Just trust: It is a matter of the will.

If we want a helpful insight into this, we shall find it in Bunyan's 'Holy War' where Captain Credence, the spirit of faith, who had come from the Royal City, and Lord Willbewill, the human will, one of the inhabitants of Mansoul, fight side by side under Prince Emmanuel.

Paul says to the Philippians: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." In other words, while God provides everything we lack and asks no contribution from us, He must have our active co-operation. He made the Ship of our lives, and has assumed command as Captain - this is what it means to be a Christian. He has sent the wind of His Spirit and provided even the sails of faith, but He will not set the sails, we must co-operate with Him.

Let us then take our orders from our great Captain, set our sails and maintain them high for the wind of heaven to fill. So we shall sail on day by day over the sea of life, through the inevitable storms, to God's New World where we already belong.

Bible references: Mark 11:22; Luke 17:5; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 9:24-27; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 2:12, 13; 4:13; Col. 1:29; 2 Tim. 2:3-7

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