



SHIP-SHAPE CHRISTIANS

One day a teacher gave her Sunday school class an assignment to write an essay “Why God likens Christians to sheep.” There was an Australian in the group, and Aussies pronounce their “i’s” as “ee”, so he misunderstood the title and wrote an article on “Why God Likens Christians to Ships.” This was an unusual analogy, but the article was so good it got an “A”! She then read out the article, which went like this:

“Why God likens Christians as Ships. Well, I guess that there are many reasons since ships and Christians share many common characteristics.

Ships are created to sail the seven seas. Ships go wherever they are sent regardless of the length of the journey or the conditions of the sea.

Christians, similarly, are pilgrims who go whenever and wherever God wants them to. God’s people are sojourners who want to do God’s will, irrespective of the circumstances and the environment they may find themselves in.

A ship will sail through calm seas, pirate-infested waters, dangerous shallows, huge waves and strong winds. But the ship must not be sunk by all these elements or else that will be its end.

Christians, like ships, also go through peaceful times as well as turbulent periods in their lives. And, just like a ship, a Christian cannot allow the ‘angry seas’ that he or she experiences in daily life to sink him or her.

A ship must be docked at the port every once in a while to be re-loaded, repaired and replenished. A ship cannot continue to sail the high seas indefinitely or it will run out of steam and be lost.

Similarly a Christian must assemble regularly with other Christians to be refreshed and recharged spiritually.

A Christian needs the spiritual instructions and the brotherly fellowship that is provided in church services.

Otherwise the Christian, like the ship, will burn out in the aimless motions of life.

Nevertheless the ship is not built to stay in port. In fact it is very costly for a ship to be berthed. Although being in port is the safest place for a ship (it is sheltered from storms and less likely to be attacked by pirates), the reason a ship is built is not to be docked at the harbour but to sail the seas. It only calls at port when the need arises. In the same way, the Christian’s objective isn’t just to stay in church. A Christian’s greatest job is to go out to the world to bear testimony of Christ and to share the gospel.

A Christian must go out into the world to meet with hardened atheists, deceived individuals, suffering souls in difficult circumstances and unpredictable situations. It is indeed very much like a ship sailing into uncharted waters in unknown weather conditions.

But sail the ship must, for that is the very purpose it was built in the first place. A Christian too is like a sheep sent forth among wolves. It’s not a comfortable or trouble-free journey, but like the ship, it is the very reason why Christians are called disciples of Christ.

Well, I think the above points show why God considers us to be like ships.”

The teacher then put down the essay and said “This is the reason Johnny received an “A”.

Here we are in Auckland, the “City of Sails”, so I thought it would be good to consider this subject of comparing the Christian life to a ship or boat, which is a very appropriate analogy, because we often talk of our Christian life as a *journey*, and it can certainly be compared to a journey by sea.

There is an example in Matthew 8:23-27, a story from the life of Jesus Christ, which is instructive in this regard.

The Sea of Galilee is the only fresh water lake in Palestine, so a great place for fishing. It is shaped like a harp (called in Hebrew: *Kinnereth*.) It is about 7 miles across at its widest. The boat wasn’t a large one – just a small fishing boat with no sails, big enough for about a dozen men. In a really bad storm, even though seasoned fishermen, they could be terrified. Sudden storms at this location are fairly frequent.



Wooden longboat in the Sea of Galilee (photo Wikipedia)

Verse 23: “Then He got into the boat and His disciples followed Him.”

Our Christian journey is like a boat trip. Jesus invites us into His boat to travel with Him. The disciples followed Him in a physical boat. We follow Him in a spiritual boat. It’s like setting out from the comfortable “world” we know, into the unknown, sailing into unfamiliar waters – into water rather than the land we’ve been on all our lives as non-believers. Every boat must have a skipper, and our captain is Jesus “The captain of our salvation.” There are lots of different passengers on a boat – we’ve been placed into the church with others of all descriptions. When we bought our ticket, we didn’t know all of the others who would be on the boat, but perhaps a number of them. The ticket was paid for us by the blood of Christ. The skipper died so we could join Him on the trip.

Verse 24: “Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping.”

The boat goes along smoothly, blown by the wind of the Holy Spirit. (The Holy Spirit is compared to wind in John 3:6-7.) The more we catch the wind of the Holy Spirit and let it propel us, the better we will do. But then a sudden storm blew up.

An excerpt from William Barclay’s commentary on the Gospel of Matthew:



Sea of Galilee in relation to the Dead Sea

“Dr W.M. Christie, who spent many years in Galilee, describes his experience. He says that during these storms the winds seem to blow from all the directions at the same time, for they rush down the narrow gorges in the hills and strike the water at an angle. He tells of an occasion when *“A company of visitors were standing on the shore at Tiberias, and noting the glassy surface of the water and the smallness of the lake, they expressed doubts as to the possibility of such storms as those described in the gospels. Almost immediately the wind sprang up. In twenty minutes the sea was white with foam-crested waves. Great billows broke over the towers at the corner of the city walls, and the visitors were compelled to seek shelter from the blinding spray, though now two hundred yards from the lakeside.”*

From time to time the storms of trial, persecution, troubles and tribulations hit us!

2 Timothy 3:12 (NKJV) “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

And of course the key is to go to the Captain and take his direction out of trouble.

But Jesus was sleeping. (Mark says His head was on a cushion.) He had just had a busy day and was exhausted from His ministry with the crowds. Here is a reminder Jesus was truly human. He fell asleep in the boat after a busy day. And how often does it seem that He is asleep when we ask for His help in trials! However, let’s read on and see what He can do.

Verse 25: “The disciples went and woke Him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” This is what we need to do. Call on Him when we are in trouble.

Verse 26: “He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.” He didn’t chide them for disturbing Him with their prayers, but for disturbing themselves with their fears.

It must have been disappointing to Jesus to see them so fearful and terrified even though He was there with them. Their request shows they had faith He could save them, but it also shows their lack of faith. They came to Him in a panic, not in firm confidence, which they should have had, having seen all the miracles He had done. They should have known that since He was there they had nothing to fear!

But isn’t that the way we are too? Our faith is sometimes weak. We might think “The Church is so small – is it going to go under?” or “When is my health problem going to end?” but Jesus is with us, so there is no need to fear! Faith casts out fear, and fear casts out faith.

Jesus can conquer and calm every storm in our lives. We can have peace in the midst of storms when we realise He is here with us.

Verse 27 “The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey Him!”

A rhetorical question expressed the idea that there is no one else like this! Jesus is God – He has control over nature. And He has control over the spiritual aspects of our lives, the challenges we face because Satan sets up storms and barriers in our lives.

Hopefully the disciples in future could look back on this situation, and if problems arose they could think – He can rescue us from storms, and He will again.

And so our faith grows slowly as we remember the times He has rescued us, and we can face the future with confidence. Reading narratives like this in the Bible should help build our faith, as we realise nothing is impossible to Him.

The Bible is the compass we can be guided by as we continue on the boat voyage of our Christian life. Here are a couple more scriptures on this.

Psalms 107:28-30 ²⁸ “Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distress.²⁹ He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed.³⁰ They were glad when it grew calm, and He guided them to their desired haven.”

1 Timothy 1:19 “holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith.”

Hebrews 6:19 “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain”

So there are indeed many comparisons between our Christian life and a ship voyage! We get on the boat when Jesus Christ calls us. We sail off for the destination of the Kingdom of God, leaving the past behind us.

The boat has a good solid foundation that shouldn’t leak water – it is built on Jesus Christ and the prophets. Jesus Christ is our Captain. We find our direction and are guided by the compass of the Bible, and we are propelled by the winds of the Holy Spirit. We need to stop at a port from time to time – every week for services, to repair our nets, and then be out on the water again. But we need to

be out there on the water, in the world, doing the job of a Christian, because that's what a ship is built for. We need to be using the nets on board to do some fishing. That's the subject for another sermon!

So we're all in the same boat! All going for a cruise! A cruise that runs through storms. But the captain can see us through them safely – as He did for His disciples 2,000 years ago.

Happy Sailing!