

# Can Christians Shipwreck their Lives?

By Michael M. Kerns

## Introduction: Saints Can Shipwreck Spiritually

My Aussie friend piloted his sailboat as a hobby until one night he suddenly quit. Without warning, the not so pacific sea threatened at dusk to capsize his boat with just him and his wife. He sensed the danger and had to trust his years of nautical knowledge and timely perception to avoid shipwreck and death. He knew one nearby safe harbor with a narrow entry bounded by rocky shoals that could destroy the boat and take their lives. He navigated to safety without shipwreck, saved himself and his wife, and soon after that sold his boat. Christians can shipwreck their lives and sometimes with awful results. Paul warned Timothy about the possibility of shipwrecked saints. A shipwrecked saint no longer holds to both “faith and a good conscience.”

*“This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme” (1 Timothy 1:18-20).*

The combination of what we know, and living according to what we know, prevents shipwreck. My sailor friend avoided shipwreck because of his acquired knowledge to make quick judgments and because of a good conscience to warn or affirm him in his decisions. Divine judgment arrives at death with a verdict of awful condemnation for the lost or with a verdict of eternal reward for the redeemed. In the meantime, we make judgments every day, and those judgments should include an evaluation about our spiritual life. How does the conscience guide us in these judgments? How does our faith fit in these judgments? How does the saint hold to “*faith and a good conscience*” to prevent a shipwrecked life?

## Self-judgment Prevents Spiritual Shipwreck

The Apostle Paul contended that no one, including himself, should judge him because, “*it is the Lord who judges me*” (1 Corinthians 4.4)]. On the other hand, when the apostle faced his accusers, Ananias and then Felix, he offered the defense that he had lived his life with a good (Acts 23:1) or clear (Acts 24:16) conscience. Paul judged himself that he did not violate his beliefs or faith before God or man so that he considered his conscience as clear or “*void of offense*” [KJV, ASV].

*“I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust, So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man” (Acts 24:14b-16).*

The Apostle Paul also reminded those at Corinth to judge themselves.

*“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5).*

The use of faith in 1 Timothy 1:18 certainly refers to trust in Christ, but it could refer to faith as that body of knowledge that you know to be true about God, as He revealed it in Scripture. In his defense before Felix, Paul connected his clear conscience with his worship of God or his faith which he built on Scripture [see Acts 24 above]. When he wrote to the church at Corinth, Paul defined “faith” as what you believe. Later in the same epistle, Paul refers to the falling away as falling away from “the” faith. *“But the Spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons.”* (1 Timothy 4:1)

Even if faith in this context of 1 Timothy 1:18 means “trust in Christ,” a saint must continue to grow that faith. “Doctrine” might substitute as a synonym for “faith” in 1 Timothy because of the whole context of the letter. Paul warns Timothy to confront false teachers. Paul employed the word *Heterodidaskaleō* [*hetero* – different, other; *didaskaleo* – teaching] to identify false doctrine. False doctrine opposes true doctrine and must be identified and refuted. *“As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine [Heterodidaskaleō]”* (1 Timothy 1:3).

Faith rests on what you know. Everyone exercises faith daily in a variety of venues. Biblical faith works no differently but biblical faith rests on what God has revealed in His word. While the saint trusts reasonable evidence (DeWitt, Faith, 53) that trust does not exclude doubt. The apostle Paul made it a habit to equip the saints by the growth of their faith as his missionary journeys reveal.

*So, the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.* (Acts 16.5)

*strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.* (Acts 14.22)

Conscience acts like a siren because a siren warns of imminent danger, like an advancing tornado. The diligent weatherman employs forecasting knowledge and radar to know when to trigger the public alarm to alert listeners to take evasive action. Conscience also acts like a referee who throws a penalty flag to signal a violation in a football game. The conscience triggers an internal alarm and signals a moral violation when a person ignores or violates his own values. Denying the warning of the conscience also means a denial of guilt or of danger.

Without a growth of faith through Scripture, how can the conscience work? The conscience responds only to what the mind knows. The companions of “faith and good conscience” must journey together with each saint to prevent shipwreck now.

## **Everyone Has a Conscience**

No one knows exactly how the mind and the conscience work together or even if the two have a separate identity. We may lack precise definition of the conscience, but we know what the conscience does. When a person acts contrary to what he believes, then the conscience warns. When a person acts in line with his beliefs, then the conscience commends. Without the working of this internal warning system, life goes awry, and a person then lives in conflict with himself or even in conflict with God.

The active conscience—that internal warning of right and wrong—began in the garden of Eden. All that Adam and Eve knew, they knew from what God had told them. In that garden, He called them with the freedom to serve with only the limitation of one prohibition. *“but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”* (Genesis 2:17).

Adam and Eve had fellowship with each other and with the Lord, but all that changed when they disobeyed by eating from the tree. They lost their innocence in the sense that they then knew about evil, both as an idea and as an experience in their lives. From that moment on, they had a knowledge of right and wrong and an active conscience to remind them of right and wrong. *Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever”* (Genesis 3:22).

Prior to their choices against God, Adam and Eve lived in a state of innocence and needed no conscience, since the Lord acted as their conscience or warning system. They lacked a conscience until they sinned. After that Fall in the Garden, every person has a conscience. Every person has a sense of right and wrong. The Jews had the Law and the Gentiles had a law on their hearts. *“They [Gentiles] show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them”* (Romans 2:15).

Both Cain and Abel saw sacrifice as moral obligation before a holy God. Cain had a conscience just like Abel and knew right and wrong but refused to listen to that conscience to do right when the Lord rejected his sacrifice. He had direct revelation from God to inform his beliefs but chose not to follow what he knew and carried out the awful deed of murdering his brother.

*The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it”* (Genesis 4:6, 7).

## **Knowledge Informs the Conscience**

This built-in warning system of the conscience cannot work or warn without knowledge. In the case of Adam, Eve, Abel and Cain, the Lord spoke directly to them to know His standard of right and wrong. God Himself directly informed their thinking for their world view. General revelation around us points us to the existence of God, although some reject that knowledge.

*“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse”* (Romans 1:18-20).

On the practical everyday level, people develop their self-knowledge or values from a variety of sources other than general revelation. Parents pass on their knowledge by their modeling and by their speech. An admired teacher can impart knowledge. A coach could inform us about his view of leadership or perseverance. Our friends can influence us for good and for evil. Our body of knowledge grows into our own personal world view.

The saint builds that knowledge best from Scripture. God's knowledge transcends the subjective and gives the saint an objective standard. Breathed-out Scripture creates a proven and unassailable knowledge that demands obedience. *"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work"* (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with always to the end of the age"* Matthew 28.19, 20

The word "observe" has a stronger meaning than we give it today. When we speak of observation, we may think of the observation of Veterans Day or Memorial Day as a day off from work. The biblical idea means to "keep" or "keep an eye on." The word has its origin in the idea of a soldier on the wall who constantly trains his eyes to find the enemy.

Without an observation of Scripture, you cannot know what to obey. What the mind knows, the conscience condemns if the mind violates what it knows. Without an appropriation of knowledge, the conscience fails to warn. "Christian instruction is to be a continuous process...continuing after baptism with a view to enabling disciples to walk worthily of their vocation." [A.B. Bruce, "Synoptic Gospels," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. [reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974], 1:340.]

## **Ignoring "Faith and Conscience" Brings Shipwreck**

The Apostle Paul pointed out the danger of leaving behind the inseparable companions of "faith and conscience." He called that danger "shipwrecked." My friend avoided literal shipwreck in the future by not boarding another boat, but saints do not have that kind of permission after spiritual shipwreck. If they leave faith and conscience behind they could suffer consequences now. Hymenaeus and Alexander shipwrecked their faith by intentionally abandoning faith and conscience. Paul disciplined them by turning them over to Satan. *"By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme"* (1 Timothy 1:18-20).

In the church at Corinth, a saint had intentionally committed sexual immorality. The apostle also had delivered that one over to Satan. *"To deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"* (1 Corinthians 5:6). Commentators give two possible definitions for the delivery of a saint to Satan. It could mean an illness or death such as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. (Acts 5.3)

Others define "delivery" to Satan as excommunication. Luke, in the book of Acts, mentioned six times the Way as a name for those who now entrusted themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. The followers of Jesus no longer had legal protection as members of a legal religion in Judah. In excommunication, they would no longer have fellowship with fellow followers of the resurrected Jesus.

We no longer live in the first days of the church when public disobedience brought the powerful discipline of the apostles. We cannot know the cause of people's illnesses or accidents, but some saints who suffer may suffer because they have shipwrecked their lives. The path to a shipwrecked life begins when a saint quits paying attention to what God has said. The writer to the Hebrews speaks in a nautical motif when he

speaks of drifting from the assumed anchor of the Word. *“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it”* (Hebrews 2:1).

## **Shipwrecked Saints Can Return to the Faith**

When Paul rebuked the church at Corinth for not excluding the man in sexual immorality, he expected the man to return, and when he repented, he rebuked the Corinthians for not returning him to the church. The text does not reveal the blasphemy of Hymenaeus and Alexander, but it could refer to false teaching. That would fit the context of 1 Timothy. *“If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing”* (1 Timothy 6:3-4). Whatever the blasphemy, Paul expected Hymenaeus and Alexander to return once they had learned their error and repented.

Later in the epistle, Paul speaks about those who have permanently departed from the faith and possess seared or burned consciences that cannot respond to error. He did not refer to Hymenaeus and Alexander in that way. They had a true faith but had erred in their ways. We have two different groups here in Ephesus. Two true believers have neglected “faith and conscience” to find themselves shipwrecked. False believers had slipped in who taught false doctrine, but they do not know Christ. The gift of prophecy that Timothy received and the counsel from Paul would enable him to distinguish between the two.

*“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth”* (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

Some Bible students have characterized the life of Lot as a “saved soul but a wasted life.” In that characterization, Lot would fit in the category of shipwrecked. Despite his immoral behavior, he did not lose his faith. No one should choose to live in such a way because of present discipline and future loss of reward.

*“and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked [for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard]; then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment”* (2 Peter 2:7-9).

## **Shipwrecked: Possible But Avoidable**

A clear conscience has no guilt. The conscience cannot condemn or commend without rules or a standard, and the mind holds the knowledge of each person’s moral standard. An uninformed conscience cannot warn a person. The worthy referee, the wise weatherman, and my sailor friend would have good consciences, if they followed what they knew to be true.

Paul presented his good conscience as evidence of his innocence. He had no guilt because he had trained his mind by the Word of God and obeyed that Word. The saint must do likewise to avoid shipwreck and to wage the good warfare (1 Timothy 1:18) because no spiritual journey will go well now, if the saint chooses to leave behind these two companions of “faith and conscience.”