

The Wednesday Word April 11, 2012: The (Almost) Forgotten Story of John Harper of the Titanic

I grew up with stories of the Titanic. My Grandmother and Uncles had seen the great ship sail out of Belfast Lough at the beginning of her doomed maiden voyage. One of the many stories I heard about was that of Dr. John Harper. He's almost forgotten now. However, John Harper was a fearless Scottish Baptist pastor and evangelist, who accompanied by his 6-year-old daughter and niece set sail on the Titanic. He was on his way to America to preach the gospel. Prior to this, Harper had successfully pastored churches in both Glasgow and London. He had also preached the gospel in various parts of England and Scotland and had indeed preached several times in East Belfast near where the Titanic was being built.

The Titanic was no run of the mill ship. It was "a floating hotel, a small town at sea." Some people said she was unsinkable.

On Sunday the 14th of April, 1912, the day when death struck, the weather was fine, the sea calm. Harper attended the church service for the passengers. His niece tells that later that afternoon she saw her Uncle speaking individually to people about their souls. It seems he was in the habit of seeking out the lost sheep wherever he went.

As for the ship, no one suspected the approaching danger, but the infamous iceberg struck all the same. When the collision happened Harper immediately ensured that his daughter and niece were placed in one of the lifeboats. At first, the ship's authorities said that there was no pressing danger. After all the Titanic was unsinkable. In spite of these reports, Harper knew that the Titanic was doomed and having ensured the safety of his loved ones began immediately to announce that not only should the women and children get into the lifeboats, but also the unsaved. Harper, then moved up and down the decks stopping people and asking them were they saved. If not, he urged them to sue for mercy and believe and trust in the Christ who had died for sinners. Thankfully he had never read the literature of some of the modern preachers who disdain such a direct approach.

At this point he assembled those he could and earnestly prayed for their salvation praying that God would grant them repentance and faith. We don't know how many hearts the Lord opened, but this we know, as the ship sank, Harper jumped with others into the icy waters and began swimming around urging any who would listen to repent and believe the gospel.

On that fateful night when over 1500 people died, John Harper was seen swimming frantically from person to person preaching Christ. He swam up to one young man who had climbed up on a piece of debris and between breaths asked, "Are you saved?" The young man replied that he was not. Harper having urged him to repent and believe then took off his life jacket and threw it to the man saying, "Here then, since you are not saved you need this more than I do..." And then swam away to other people.

Only seven people were plucked from the icy water that night to join the survivors in the lifeboats. The young man was one of them. Four years later, at a survivors meeting, in Hamilton, Ontario, this same young man stood up and in tears testified of how that, in the icy waters, John Harper had pointed him to Christ. The young man testified of how Harper had then tried to swim

back to help other people. However, because of the intense cold, he had grown too weak to swim. According to the young man, Harper's last words, called out before going under were, "Believe on the Name of the Lord Jesus and you will be saved."

John Harper and daughter Nan

Harper, has had little to no mention from Hollywood in its re-telling of the events of that awful April night. But I suppose that's to be expected. However, unknown as he is, Harper is a gospel hero. He held to the sufficiency of Christ alone for salvation and quite literally preached it till his dying breath. He preached the Christ of the cross to the doomed passengers. Perhaps they listened, perhaps not. But one thing for sure, Harper didn't give them a message of, "You can have a better life now." Nor did he urge his hearers to take Communion or any sacrament or in fact to do anything other than receive that which had already been accomplished. He unashamedly preached Christ crucified as the sinner's only hope. May the Lord inspire and empower us to do the same.

And that's the Gospel Truth!