

By Rex Morgan

April 15th this year marked the hundredth anniversary of the sinking of RMS Titanic, provoking a renewed flurry of media attention as people revisited this fascinating piece of history. More than 1,300 people paid around \$10,000 each to sail on the MS Balmoral, retracing the doomed liner's fateful journey and taking part in a memorial service at the spot where it struck the iceberg and sank.

It would be hard to find anyone who hasn't heard about the Titanic. It is a real "human interest" story and can even be seen as a modern-day parable, abounding with instructive lessons. James Cameron, director of the 1997 blockbuster movie based on the disaster said: 'This is a great sort of metaphorical novel that actually happened. You can go and visit the wreck and see this monument to human folly.'

What are some of the principles we can learn from this salutary event?

Pride Goes before Destruction

Firstly, it is an illustration of the fleeting emptiness of human pride and arrogance.

The year 1912 was an era much like ours today, marked with material prosperity and technical advancement. People were motoring around in a new contraption called a "horseless carriage", and two fanatical brothers in America were even trying to fly! In the midst of all this advancement, a magnificent ship was built—a "Titanic" achievement—a structural marvel, an engineering feat of great splendour and pride. It took 12,000 men over two years to construct for the White Star Line, then locked in bitter competition with the Cunard Line.



This was the largest and most luxurious ship the world had seen, a floating palace loaded with fine amenities, a five-star hotel on the sea, with restaurants, millionaire suites, heated swimming pool, Turkish bath, squash court, gymnasium and libraries. It had a five-foot-thick double-bottom and 16 water-tight compartments, designed so it couldn't possibly sink. The owners, builders, and news media alike proclaimed it unsinkable. It was a symbol of what humanity could achieve, and one company employee is widely quoted as saying: 'Even God himself couldn't sink this ship!'

This brings to mind the biblical maxim 'Pride goes before destruction'.¹

The wreck of Titanic was discovered in 1985 by Dr Robert Ballard. Ballard described the decaying wreckage as 'frozen rivers of rust covering the ship's side and spread out over the ocean floor'. This evokes the sage advice of Jesus, 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal'.² So much for the materialism and conceit of humanity.

One little known fact about Titanic is that while three of the ship's

prominent funnels released steam from the boilers, the fourth was just for show. The designers thought the ship would look more impressive with four funnels rather than three!³

Failure to Prepare

Another lesson the Titanic teaches us is the importance of preparedness.

On Sunday April 14th, 1912, Titanic was making excellent speed and most of the passengers spent the day indoors because the weather had suddenly turned cold. They were meant to have a lifeboat drill that day but the Captain cancelled it. Why have a drill when this ship was unsinkable?

As for lifeboats, Titanic's owners were so sure it wouldn't sink that they only included enough lifeboats for fewer than half of the passengers on board, to make for a better looking, less crowded deck.

During the day before the sinking, Titanic's radio operators received six messages from other ships warning of drifting ice, which passengers on board had begun to notice during the afternoon, but they went unheeded. At about 11.35pm there were three warnings from the crow's nest that ice

Lessons

had been spotted. The first two were ignored. Finally the officer picked up the phone—but it was too late.

Even after the passengers were informed of the collision with the iceberg, many went to bed with full confidence in Titanic's ability to stay afloat. Some refused to put on lifejackets because they said they didn't want to get dirty and mess up their clothes!

It's easy for us to criticise them now, in hindsight, but would we really have done differently if assured the vessel we were on was unsinkable? Civil defence authorities tell us regularly to be prepared for an earthquake or other natural disaster, but how many of us take that really seriously, unless we live in Christchurch!

As mentioned earlier, there weren't enough lifeboats for everyone. And even worse, when people got on to the 20 available boats, only a few were filled to capacity. Several left less than half full. For instance the first lifeboat lowered, boat number 7, had room for 65 people, but just 28 boarded. Lifeboat number 1 could accommodate 40, but departed with only 12 people on it. Forty per cent of lifeboat spaces were unfilled, while hundreds of people milled

about in the freezing water wearing life jackets.

It Can Happen to Us

Our lives can be compared to an ocean voyage. Each of us is like a ship steaming through the waves of life. So the Titanic story can hold some personal lessons for us. We need to be prepared for the 'icebergs' life might launch at us.

For instance, having insurance on items we can't afford to replace, and putting aside savings for a 'rainy day'. It is also important to maintain good relationships with family and friends we can fall back on if trouble comes.

What if the unthinkable happened and you suddenly found you had only days or weeks left to live? This type of news can and does come to unsuspecting individuals every day. At a time like that, our pride and our possessions abruptly lose their value.

History reports that as the Titanic went down the band's final number was 'Nearer My God to Thee'. When people are faced with imminent death, thoughts often turn towards God. Where do you stand with him?

The Bible says that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'.⁴ It adds that the wages of sin is death'.⁵ So from that point of view, every one of us is on a sinking ship.

But the Bible hastens to assure us that a lifeboat is at hand to rescue us. 'I am the way, the truth and the life',⁶ said Jesus. He freely saves us from spiritual death by his grace. In contrast to the tragic deficiency of lifeboats on the Titanic, this lifeboat captained by Jesus Christ has room for everyone who has ever lived! 'Everyone who believes in him (Jesus) will have eternal life'.⁷

These are some of the Titanic lessons we can learn from this dreadful incident in human history. Have you stepped into the lifeboat yet?

Notes

¹ Proverbs 16:18, all scriptures from NIV unless otherwise indicated.

² Matthew 6:19

³ About.com: 20th century history

⁴ Romans 3:23

⁵ Romans 6:23

⁶ John 14:6

⁷ Romans 3:24