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Broken Fishing Nets (Aug-Sept 1964)

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At least three kinds of nets were used by fishermen on the lake of Galilee. Reference to a Greek conordance shows the three different words used to describe the nets mentioned in Matthew 4:18-20, and Matthew 13:47. The first is a “casting-net,” a net of fine mesh weighted at the bottom. The fisherman carried this over his shoulder, and cast it in shallow water to catch small fry, principally for bait. The nets of verses 20 and 21 are “trawl-nets” (Darby’s Translation) for deep-sea fishing. The trawl-net usually drags the sea bed. The third was a “seine” operated by two crews, and pulled ashore in a semi-circle, bearing its load of fish.

These three nets suggest three types of Christian workers. The casting-net for small fry suggests the parent, guardian, or Sunday School teacher, the worker among children. The trawl-net suggests the personal worker, who by tactful approach seeks to win the individual. The seine represents the assembly working harmoniously together as “fishers of men.”

In the New English Bible the word “mending” is translated “overhauling.” By this we are made aware of three necessary operations for the proper functioning of fishing nets. First, periodical overhauling — indicating examination leading to discovery of blemishes and correction; then, washing — to maintain cleanliness. The words of our Lord Jesus fit appropriately here: “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:34). Also Psalm 119:9: “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse

his way? by taking heed thereto according to Thy Word." Next, mending — to unite broken meshes. A preacher told that a boy in Sunday School was asked: "What is a net?" and replied, "A lot of knots tied together with twine!" If the knots are not kept "tied together" much labour is lost; many fish escape.

The purpose at this point is to deal specifically with the third aspect of the care of fishing nets, and to suggest how to avoid breaking them. There are (at least) five causes for broken nets: deterioration, carelessness, enemy action, floating debris, and sunken reefs. When the causes are known, the experience of broken nets may be avoided; but when the nets are broken they should immediately be mended to extend the period of their usefulness. Applying this to the life and testimony of a believer or an assembly, the Word of God ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit should be corrective and admonitory. The need for correction is always present and admonition points out the dangers that lie ahead, showing the way of escape. In humility therefore, the life of a Christian should remain corrigible, that is, capable of being amended, corrected or reformed: "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." For this purpose He gave His gifts to the assembly (Eph. 4:11-13).

In dealing with the causes of broken nets, it should be observed that there are dangers to which all three are liable, while the larger nets are in jeopardy of specific perils. All three are open to the hazards of deterioration, careless handling, and enemy action. The seine is imperilled by floating debris, but the danger besetting the trawl-net is sunken reefs or jagged rocks.

Deterioration

Deterioration can result from age, neglect — or both. In Luke 5 Peter's net broke. Why? Perhaps it was old, and could not bear the strain of so large a draught of fishes. Or, could it be that Peter missed the importance of the exact words of Jesus when He said: "Let down your nets for a draught." Peter let down one net — and it broke! Other nets could have shared the load and saved his from breaking. It is possible for one to hear and not catch the import of the words spoken. A radio announcer in illustrating this point said: "A man came rushing excitedly out of a building, and said to another man standing outside: "Hey, I just shot your brother!" The other replied, with a friendly wave of the hand, "O.K. thanks a lot!" So, perhaps, Peter was preoccupied and inattentive. It could hardly be that he was selfish because they were "partners," but it could have been that he was disobedient. If this was so, one should not marvel that he fell down at the feet of Jesus crying: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" Both heedlessness and disobedience are potent enemies of Christian usefulness.

Formerly, fishing nets were made from cotton twine. The white nets were then steeped in a solution of hot Stockholm Tar. The tar robbed the nets of their whiteness, but impregnated them against the corroding elements in sea water. It is good to remember that Peter says: "Be clothed with humility." Humility impregnates the believer against "The pomp and vanity of this wicked world." The tar also gives to the net the peculiar odour beloved by fishermen. Modern fishing nets are made from the synthetic fibre called "nylon." Nylon nets need no preservation and are odourless. It was recently

observed that certain fishermen using nylon nets had lost their zest because they missed the odour of the tar. It became necessary to discover a synthetic substitute for Stockholm Tar and spray the nets with it.

In worship and service acceptable to God there is an odour which pleases Him, and gladdens the spirit of the worshipper: the odour of the Name of Jesus; the sweet incense of His life and sacrifice; the fragrance of His priestly office in the power of an endless life. “All thy garments smell of myrrh, and aloes, and cassia, out of the ivory palaces” (Psa. 45:8), This is the “Beloved” in whom we are accepted. But in Christendom there is much “synthetic” service and “synthetic” worship vainly offered in the name of Jesus but condemned by the Word of God: “In vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrine the commandments of men.” And again: “Their fear towards Me is taught by the precept of men.” This is “synthetic,” being of human invention rather than the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and the “truth” of God.

Careless Handling

Nets may also be broken through careless handling. This danger arises in the course of transporting them; or hanging them on the stakes to dry; or leaving them in wet bundles for long periods. Carelessness in our religious and social contacts often breeds discord among brethren. God hates this (Prov. 6:16-19). Of course, brethren should not be peevish and fretful, like brittle china to carry the label “handle with care!” Yet love should avoid and counteract the element of carelessness in Christian relationships. “Finally, brethren,” Peter wrote, “be all of one mind, having compassion one of another; love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous.”

Enemy Action

Fishing nets are also exposed to enemy action. The answer of the man to his servants in the parable of the wheat and tares was: “An enemy hath done this!” In 2 Corinthians 2:10, Paul forgave and commends forgiveness: “Lest Satan should get an advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.” Also in 2 Corinthians 11:3 “But I fear lest by any means as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtility, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is Christ.”

Floating Debris

Floating debris imperils the seine. One side of the seine — while in operation — hangs down in the water, the other floats on the surface, being bouyed up by slabs of cork. Paul’s desire was to “Win Christ,” and to this end he made sure that the “seine” of his ambition was not damaged by floating debris. Paul had more to boast of according to the flesh than many of his contemporaries. Describing this in the third chapter of Philippians, he said: “What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and do count them dung, that I may win Christ.” What were the “all things” that Paul swept out of his life like scraps of offal from the floor of a butcher’s store? They were all the advantages and attainments he had gained on the national, international, religious, cultural, and educational level. In his quest for Christ they were regarded as “floating debris.” Compared with the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord, they were, in his own word, “dung!”

Sunken Reefs

One of the chief perils of the trawl-net is sunken reefs of jagged rocks. Every Christian should realize that the "old man" is still with him; that there are in him (as well as in his brothers) deep seated personal laxities, inhibitions, tastes (likes and dislikes), peculiarities of nature and disposition, the fruit of heredity, which, someone says; "Works more surely in the transmission of evil than of good." These, if not counteracted by the "fruit of the Spirit," which is, "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance (self-control." If these personal laxities are permitted to intrude in Christian relationships there mey be dangerous protrusions; dormant, but none the less potent, destroyers of unity and fellowship among brethren. These are sunken reefs and jagged rocks against which the trawl-net of fellowship and harmony may be irrepairably damaged.

It is easy for one to criticize an-other's failings while pampering his own, which may be of larger proportions, and uglier too! Well did Bobbie Burns sing:

"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us,

To see oursels as other see us.

It wad frae mony a blunder free us;

And foolish notion."