

STRAIGHTWAY

“And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him” [Mark 1:18].

CHRISTIAN PURITIES FELLOWSHIP

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A Forgotten Tragedy in History: The Sinking Of The USS *Indianapolis*

by Dr. H. T. Spence
(In Memory of My Dear Father)

On August 16th through the 19th of this year, I was honored by invitation to be a part of the 12th reunion of the survivors of the USS *Indianapolis*, which also was the 56th Anniversary of the sinking of that same ship. This momentous occasion took place in Indianapolis, Indiana, with some 86 or 87 of the still living 110 survivors being present. Nearly 1,000 additional individuals attended who made up the survivors' families and friends.

What prompted my attendance to this historical event was twofold. First, my dear father, Dr. O. Talmadge Spence, missed being on that ship by just two hours and was “saved by a substitute,” by a man who perished

in the tragedy. Second, a few months after my father's death, through a providential correspondence, I met Edgar Harrell, an ex-marine who was one of the survivors of that ship. My heart was immediately drawn to this dear man through our correspondence and with the opportunity of having him at Foundations some months later. My love, respect, and friendship continued to grow for him from our meeting. He informed me of this up-and-coming reunion in Indianapolis and invited me to be a guest of him and his dear wife Ola during those days. It was a few weeks later that I received a personal invitation from Mr. Paul J. Murphy, the chairman of the survivors' organization (he being a survivor as

well), to give a few words concerning my father and anything else upon my heart. It was through these providences that the Lord opened the door for both my attendance and opportunity to speak.

The USS *Indianapolis* in History

Named in honor of the capital of Indiana, the heavy cruiser *USS Indianapolis* was commissioned on November 15, 1932. She was 610 feet and 4 inches in length, 66 feet and 1 inch at the beam, drawing 24 feet and 10 inches of draft when fully manned and ready for sea. The total rated horsepower was 107,000 delivered through four propellers. Her speed was 32 knots. Main armament consisted of nine 8-inch guns housed in three turrets, and a secondary armament of eight 5-inch guns.

She began her thirteen-year career as the Flagship of the Scouting Force, and later, the Scouting Fleet. Prior to World War II, she served several times as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's personal

ship of state. Throughout most of World War II, she served as Flagship of the Fifth Fleet in the Pacific under the command of Adm. Raymond A. Spruance, USN, who was himself raised in Indianapolis. The ship earned a total of 10 Battle Stars. At Okinawa, she was hit by a kamikaze (suicide plane) and suffered 38 casualties. The seriously damaged Indianapolis limped back to the United States for repairs in dry dock at Mare Island, California. Fresh from those repairs, she set a world-record run from Hunters' Point, California, to Pearl Harbor and on to Tinian Island, where under great secrecy, she delivered the world's first operational atom bomb. From Tinian she reported to Pacific Fleet Headquarters on Guam for new orders. Her new orders were to join the assembling invasion fleet at Leyte Gulf. She departed Guam without escort (the only capital ship ever to have been so dispatched). At 14 minutes past midnight on July 30, 1945, and approximately halfway between Guam and Leyte, the *Indianapolis* was struck by two torpedoes of a spread of six, fired by the submarine I-58 of the Imperial Japanese Navy. It truly was America's worst naval disaster at sea!

Doug Stanton, in his most recent book *In Harm's Way*, states the following: "On July 30, 1945, after completing a top secret mission to deliver parts of the atom bomb 'Little Boy,' which would be dropped on Hiroshima, the battle cruiser *USS Indianapolis* was torpedoed in the South Pacific by a Japanese submarine. An estimated 300 men were killed upon impact;

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close to 900 sailors were cast into the Pacific Ocean, where they remained, undetected by the Navy, for nearly five days. Battered by a savage sea, they struggled to survive, fighting off hypothermia, sharks, physical and mental exhaustion, and, finally, hallucinatory dementia. By the time rescue – which was purely accidental – arrived, all but 321 men had lost their lives; 4 more would die in military hospitals shortly thereafter. The captain's subsequent and highly unusual court-martial left many questions unanswered: How did the Navy fail to realize the *Indianapolis* was missing? Why was the cruiser traveling unescorted in enemy waters? And perhaps most amazing of all, how did these 317 men manage to survive?"

Several years later, because of the intensity of the hate mail and phone calls Captain Charles McVay received from families who lost their relatives in the sinking of the ship, he took his own life.

But in spite of the tragedies that surround this ship, it would be impossible to account the multitude of providences that also surround it. Many such providences are found in the increasing number of books being written on this tragedy, but these sources are written by individuals who do not know nor acknowledge God. Nevertheless, the providences are truly numerous, and it is evident God was in it all, including the survivors. One major providence is to be found in how the pilot of the rescue plane even sighted the survivors. The plane's radio antenna was malfunctioning

as the plane was flying over the area where the survivors were. The pilot dropped himself down in the bomb hatch underneath the plane in order to fix the antenna which was on the outside of the plane. It was in this upside down position, looking down upon the waters, that he saw the men and called out to his co-pilot, "ducks on the pond."

Amidst the backdrop of such a tragedy in history, the Lord gave me a few minutes to speak on that Friday night of the reunion the following words that expressed my heart and burden:

The Message Given By A Son For A Deceased Father

"I come tonight as an unknown to you, but yet a small part of the ever-unfolding drama of the USS *Indianapolis*. A number of books have been written concerning the ship itself and of the men who lost their lives as well as those who survived. But no amount of books could contain the stories of the rippling effects in history of that ship, and of the men whose lives the USS *Indianapolis* did touch directly and indirectly, who were not on board that fatal night. My dear father was one of those men.

My father, Othniel Talmadge Spence, was the son of a preacher. He was named Othniel after the first judge of Israel found in the book of Judges of the Bible. Othniel means 'Lion of God.' His middle name was in memory of a famous preacher T. Dewitt Talmage. My father joined the Navy on his 17th birthday, desiring to serve his country and yet to run away from God and his

Christian heritage. He was in the United States Navy the last two years of the war.

His story in connection with the *Indianapolis* is that he was rostered as a standby alternate for a member of the crew assigned to the ship. At that time my father was stationed at Mare Island, California, having completed two Navy schools for electrician's mate. He was placed in the so-called "bull pen," which was a three-day waiting period to board the ship. The day before, my father checked up on the individual who was listed to board, and the man had come down with a high fever of 104 degrees and was in sick-bay. As an alternate, my father proceeded to make himself ready. The pharmacist mate had made it clear that my father would have to be ready, for there was no hope for the man recovering in time. But on June 29, 1945, two hours before the "lock down" of the ship, the individual miraculously recovered and took the place of my father. That day was also the 19th birthday of my father. On that day, 30 new officers and 250 new enlisted men, many inexperienced, boarded that ship. My father could have been one of them, but he was saved by a substitute.

As a petty officer my father was reassigned to the USS *Yarnell*, 541 destroyer, and later was transported to island duty. He was on the island of Guam the day the B29s returned, many crippled in the last 4 or 5 days leading up to the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. My father was so moved by the incident of his being saved by a substitute, in hearing of the great tragedy of the

Indianapolis (the man for whom he was to be the alternate died down in the ship), that he volunteered to remain in the South Pacific for the special assignment of the Bikini bomb test which was planned immediately after the war.

When he was released from the Navy a few months later, he was saved by another substitute. He accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior. This great Savior became my father's substitute on the Cross. The Son of God died in my father's place, to take his eternal death of Hell and reconcile him to God.

Some months later my father married a professional classical music singer from Nova Scotia, Canada. God called him into the ministry, and for over 52 years they both gave their lives to this calling. He became a unique scholar in many fields of study, writing over 40 books, over 300 hymns and 14 cantatas. Some 27 years ago he started a most unique Bible college and seminary in Dunn, North Carolina, located where Interstate 95 and Interstate 40 cross. His last major accomplishment was the building of a 30,000 square-foot learning center with over 1,600 art pieces presenting the history of the world and the church.

In the last 30 years of his life, he prayed every day for the survivors of the *Indianapolis* and especially for the exoneration of Captain McVay. He also wrote letters to friends, senators, and congressmen informing them of the tragic story of the improper court-martial of Captain McVay. My father, in 1995, was

present here in Indianapolis for the celebration days of the unveiling of the most honorable memorial dedicated to those who lost their lives and those who survived that most unique moment in history.

My father was a man who gave a few years to his country, and the rest of his years he gave to God.

Over two years ago my father, who was a picture of health, was diagnosed with Bulbar Paralysis, the worst form of Lou Gehrig's disease. In 11 months he went from 185 pounds to 90 pounds, but wrote two large books on *The Human Spirit* and a lengthy musical cantata on the Civil War. In the last four months of his life, I moved into his home to care for him in the evenings and throughout the nights. We did not want to place him in a nursing home, nor my mother who over five years ago had suffered a severe stroke which left her bedridden. We are thankful for Christian caregivers who are with her during the day so that my wife and I can continue in our ministry as president of Foundations Bible College and pastor of the Collegiate Church.

My father became comatose the last two weeks of his life, and on July 17, 2000, he passed away. His largely attended funeral included dignitaries from all over the world. But one of his requests was for the flag of his country to drape his casket. The Navy also provided two men to present the flag with the playing of "Taps."

In his latter years I asked my father why he believed God allowed

the *Indianapolis* to be sunk. In his strong belief in the providence and sovereign working of God in human affairs, my father responded, 'God uses nations as a check and balance in history; He is also behind their rise and fall. During World War II the *Indianapolis* became one of the most critical moments in our 20th century history. God allowed that ship to carry the key component for the bomb that would not only bring an end to that world war but also change the course of history. He permitted that ship to make its way safely to its destination with its history-changing cargo. He then permitted that bomb to detonate over Hiroshima. BUT, He also permitted the ship that carried the bomb to be sacrificed.' A check and balance even in a war against what America viewed as a pagan nation: A Ship for A City!

After my father's demise I was perusing the large amount of mail that had poured in over the weeks surrounding his death. I came across a packet from an ex-marine, Edgar Harrell. The enclosed letter requested copies of my father's tract entitled, "Saved By A Substitute." But the packet also included a video of this ex-marine's Christian testimony and how he believed God was with him through the devastating days and nights in the Pacific. After several letters in correspondence, I invited Mr. Harrell and his precious wife Ola to come to our Bible Conference, its theme being 'The Providence of God in Human Affairs.' Mr. Harrell gave an hour message on 'The Providence of God in Time of War.' I want to thank him for these months of friendship and

furthering my knowledge of the USS *Indianapolis*' sinking.

My father was saved by a substitute, one who died among 880 men. Some would say my father had a "religious experience" from being spared. But it was more than that. He found Christ as His substitute in dying on the Cross. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 5:7 and 8, 'For scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.'

My father spent his life as a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have come this evening to pay his deepest respects to those surviving the tragedy of the USS *Indianapolis*. I have been honored these days to be among you. And may each one of you come to find Jesus Christ to be the substitute of your life in eternity. Thank you."

A Postscript To The *Indianapolis* History

It was almost one year to the day of my dear father's passing away that the United States Navy gave the exoneration of Captain McVay. The Navy had gone for many years without acknowledging the survivors, and a few short years ago they were ready to give some commendation for their heroism. But the men refused to accept it unless their captain was exonerated. It was at an emotional Saturday morning meeting when the military awards were finally given in recognition of these brave men and the exon-

eration of Captain McVay declared to the surviving crew. One of the key individuals to bring this about was a young 12-year-old boy (who now is 17 years of age). He had seen the movie *Jaws* in which the incident of the *Indianapolis*' men being eaten by sharks is mentioned. It stirred his young heart to make extensive research about the ship's sinking and the survivors' encounter with sharks. He became so knowledgeable about this moment in history that he appeared before several Congressional hearings, the "Today Show," and many other TV talk shows and radio programs. He truly brought the sinking of the ship and the stories of the survivors to national attention. His persistence also assisted in bringing the exoneration of the captain. To view the survivors affectionately hugging Hunter Scott was also a heart-moving scene during the recent days of the reunion.

Conclusion

When a Christian reflects upon such incidents in human history or in his own personal life, he sees with great clarity the providence of God. We never do see the moving of God when the situation is taking place; it is only afterwards, when looking back, that God's hand becomes apparent. And what may have been forgotten has a way of resurfacing years later. How often we view a circumstance in its present distress as a tragedy, but later, when God has worked other matters in time, the situation of the past is now viewed as a triumph. Perhaps, in the experience of a darkness that we wanted to forget, God will work another thing, and

then another, and collectively we will see its wonder for our life. In Romans 8:28 we read, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." If one thing is judged isolated and alone, it may not be seen as good. But when we view **all** the workings of God in our life collectively, then it is for good. We must never judge a circumstance by itself; we must wait and give providence time to bring about another working, in another circumstance, that will balance out what we thought was a tragedy.

In speaking with the survivors of the USS *Indianapolis* during their reunion, I was told that they went for a number of years without ever speaking of the ordeal, not even with their wives and children. But the first reunion in 1960 brought them together, and they began to speak to each other about their ex-

periences in those shark-infested waters. Now they have become heroes of our nation, with books being written and movies and documentaries being made. It is a natural wonder of providence how the tide has been turned for their lives. The sad thing is that most of those dear men, and the books written of their historic incident, do not acknowledge the hand of God. Yet there are perhaps a half dozen of these men who have come to trust God and His Son for their lives.

May we as Christians always live in complete confidence of the continuous workings of God to make all events and happenings fulfill His design for our lives. He is in control of all things to the very end of our days. What may be a desire-to-forget tragedy in life could become, with other workings of God, a great moment when God's glory is evident.



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Schedule for the
Fifth Congress of Fundamentalists
at Foundations Bible College
October 3-5, 2001

"A Call For Revival In Times of Global Apostasy"

Wednesday, October 3rd

7:00 PM Dr. H. T. Spence
A Call For Revival In Times Of Global Apostasy
8:00 PM Rev. David Cortés
The Apostasy In Mexico

Thursday, October 4th

9:00 AM Dr. Dennis Lowry
Praying For The World
10:00 AM Rev. Peter Pinyol
The Apostasy In Spain
1:00 PM Panel - A Presentation Of
The Three Countries
7:00 PM Dr. Abraham Nakom
The Apostasy in Ghana
8:00 PM Rev. David Cortés
The Spiritual Call Of God To Mexico

Friday, October 5th

9:00 AM Dr. Dennis Lowry
Praying For God's People Around The World
10:00 AM Dr. Abraham Nakom
The Spiritual Call Of God To Ghana
1:00 PM Panel - "The Ministry Vision For
The Three Countries"
7:00 PM Rev. Peter Pinyol
The Spiritual Call Of God To Spain
8:00 PM Dr. H. T. Spence
A Plea For Revival Among The Remnant

Speakers for the Fifth Congress of Fundamentalists at Foundations Bible College October 3-5, 2001

Rev. David Cortés – Born in a Mexican family with strong separation principles and a great respect for the home, Rev. David Cortés became the pastor of the Puerta Abierta Baptist Church in Tijuana, B.C., Mexico, in 1981, finding it in full compromise and with strong ties within four different conventions. During the process to separate this church from such intricate compromise, he and his family suffered the fierce and relentless attacks of the enemy. In the providence of God, Pastor Cortés and the Puerta Abierta Baptist Church stand firm and often alone in their position in the area of godly music and are being used of God to spread true Biblical Fundamentalism in the Latin world.

Rev. Peter Pinyol is serving the Lord in the “Catalán” region of Castellbisbal, Barcelona, Spain. Here he stands firm and holds high the banner of Christ as pastor of the only Fundamentalist Bible Church in Castellbisbal. His ministry also includes literature publication and translation, Jewish outreaches, and Christian camps. Approximately 40 million people live in spiritual darkness in the country of Spain, and one of Rev. Pinyol’s special burdens is to start a Bible institute where nationals will be prepared to serve the Lord. Rev. Pinyol has translated a number of publications on Fundamentalism into the Spanish language.

Dr. Abraham Nakom – Like a voice crying in the wilderness, Dr. Abraham Nakom speaks for Christ and Fundamentalism in his spiritually barren homeland of Ghana, West Africa. Gloriously saved in 1960 through a street preacher, he later left his position as tribal chief and enrolled in a Bible college in answer to the call to the ministry. He has founded three missions/churches in Ghana and is currently pastoring. His present ministries also include an expanding Christian day school with the development of an academic program for the children of his village. In 1997 Dr. Nakom received a Master’s degree from Foundations Bible College and Seminary and returned in 1999 to be presented an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree.

Dr. H. T. Spence is the President of Foundations Bible College and Seminary in Dunn, North Carolina. His father, Dr. O. Talmadge Spence, founded the ministry, and it has been his son’s desire to “Forward the Faith” of his forefathers.

Dr. Dennis Lowry is the Vice President of Foundations Bible College and Seminary and has been a part of its ministry for over twenty years. He will be giving the prayer challenges in the morning sessions of the Congress.

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