

***Concordia* Death Toll Hits 16; Several More Still Missing**
The Wired Word
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In the News

On January 13, the Italian cruise ship *Costa Concordia*, with more than 3,200 passengers and over 1,000 crew members on board, hit a rock in the Tyrrhenian Sea just off the shore of the island of Giglio, near the western coast of Italy. After the impact tore a 160-foot hole in the hull, the ship's main propulsion was lost. The vessel was then maneuvered near to shore by means of its bow thrusters, where it grounded and then listed to 80 degrees and came to rest on an underwater ledge with about half of its bulk above the water. The position, however, is unsteady, and there is danger of the ship slipping off and sinking into deeper water.

During a chaotic and poorly supervised evacuation, most of those on board were saved, with significant help from rescuers coming from the island. But as of January 25, 16 bodies have been found on the ship, and about 20 people are still missing.

The ship's captain, Francesco Schettino, has been blamed for bringing the ship too close to land, waiting too long to give the "abandon ship" order and getting into a boat himself, along with his second-in-command, while many passengers and crew were still on board and receiving little direction about what to do.

Translations of a recorded phone conversation between Schettino and Captain Gregorio de Falco of the Italian Coast Guard, who was in Livorno in overall command of rescue efforts, show de Falco demanding Schettino get back on board, do his job and report how many people remained. Schettino did not refuse the command, but he did not reboard either.

Schettino, who is currently under house arrest and accused of manslaughter, causing a shipwreck and abandoning ship, has said that the rock the ship hit was not on his chart, and that a manager from the cruise company had pressured him to sail close to shore because such grandstanding is good publicity for the cruise company and pleasing to passengers. The practice, called a "bow," is when ships, with decks lit up, sound their sirens while passing close to a town.

Another account says Schettino intended to salute a former cruise liner captain he served under who lived on the island and had even phoned the friend in advance to alert him that the ship would be sailing by. Some timelines say Schettino was on the phone with the man at the time of collision.

James Gruetzner, a *Wired*

Word team member who is a retired naval officer (submarine service), commented, “Going into a gig [captain’s boat] to coordinate rescue efforts -- the recordings seem to indicate that he was alongside the ship doing that when ordered to reboard -- may make some sense, but having him and the first mate together does not.”

Gruetzner added, “One can see the captain becoming both villain and hero in this: villain for getting too close to shoal water, risking hitting an uncharted shoal; hero for quick thinking in bringing the ship into shallow water so it would ground instead of sink in deep water.”

After reviewing some of the rescue transcripts that were published in the Italian press as well as some track data, Gruetzner said, “To say that it looks bad for Schettino is an understatement. If he’s only convicted of homicide, he’ll have gotten off lightly.”

Gruetzner said that after reading the reports, he was reminded of “black box” recordings of the Concorde crash near Paris and the Air France 447 crash into the Atlantic in June 2009. “But each was different,” said Gruetzner. “In the Concorde crash, the pilots were faced with a damaged aircraft, and no matter how hard they tried, they were going to crash and die. In the Air France 447 case, the recently recovered black box indicates that the crash was 100 percent pilot error -- and an error in basic flying skills. The *Costa Concordia* wreck also appears to be 100 percent error -- but, during a ‘showboating’ maneuver without taking common-sense safety precautions.”

“Yes, Schettino deserved a preliminary benefit of a doubt,” Gruetzner said, “but now enough facts -- not speculation -- have been published to piece things together in a moderately complete fashion. He not only lied to the Italian authorities and failed to seek help early on; he deserted his post. I suspect that many mariners would consider his post-grounding actions to be dereliction of duty, and his post-stranding actions to be a capital crime.”

While hope is waning that the missing will still be found alive, search and rescue divers continue to search the vessel.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Costa Concordia Death toll Reaches 16, as Skipper Blames Company. *The Australian*](#)

[A Maritime Disaster that Was Waiting to Happen. *Spiegel Online*](#)

[Reconstruction of the Costa Concordia Tragedy. *Vimeo*](#)

(narrated video of the ship’s track)

[Francesco Schettino: The Captain Who Refused to Return to Ship. *The Guardian*](#)

[Costa Concordia Transcript: Coastguard Orders Captain to Return to Stricken Ship. *The Guardian*](#)

The Big Questions

1. The captain of the cruise ship was arrested on three charges, one of which was “abandoning ship.” If there are still passengers and/or crew on board a stricken vessel, do we expect a captain to stay until everyone else has left? Why? If the ship is lost, do we expect the captain to go down with the ship? Why?
2. Is anyone being made a scapegoat in this shipwreck? What does that imply? What are the theological implications of scapegoating?
3. This disaster shows that one can cause a problem, recognize it and try to fix it, but still suffer some major consequences. How is that like life in general? What does our faith have to say about such developments?
4. In the recorded conversation between the captain of the cruise ship and the Italian Coast Guard captain, the latter orders the former to reboard and do his duty. The captain does not refuse the order, but he does not obey it either. In what ways does that mirror some of our responses to God’s call?
5. It appears that Captain Schettino (or whoever was on the bridge) was in denial for a time. How do you avoid denial when facing unexpected, difficult circumstances?

Confronting the News with Scripture

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 3:12: “*The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’*” (For context, read 3:1-13.)

The statement above is Adam’s feeble excuse for eating the forbidden fruit; he blamed it on the woman God had given him, thus indirectly blaming his sin even on God! Eve, in turn, blamed it on the serpent (v. 13).

This is a classic statement of irresponsibility: I did the deed but the fault was somebody else’s.

Questions:

Have you ever said any of these things? What is the problem with each?

Gee, I meant to call, but I just didn't get around to it.
Now look what you made me do.
She/He *told* me to do it.
I was just doing my job.
You didn't remind me.

Genesis 16:5-6: *“Then Sarai said to Abram, ‘May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!’ But Abram said to Sarai, ‘Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.’” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her ...*” (For context, read 16:1-6.)

Sarai, who had no children, lived in a society where a woman's value was often linked to the number of children, especially sons, she had borne. Her husband Abram had the normal worry of men in that culture about having no male heir to lead the clan. But in Abram's case, there was another concern: God had promised Abram that he would be the father of a great nation, but Sarai still did not conceive. Finally, Sarai brought her maid, Hagar, to Abram. Since Hagar was a servant, any child born to her and Abram would be considered Sarai's child.

Eventually, Hagar became pregnant, but the fact that she could conceive while Sarai her mistress could not apparently caused her to feel proud, and she began to brag. Sarai became jealous of Hagar and blamed her husband. She overlooked the fact that the whole arrangement with Hagar was her idea and said, spitefully, to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you!”

But Abram did no better. He took no responsibility either and told Sarai to handle the conflict herself, saying, “Your maid is in your hands; do to her as you please.”

What a pair Abram and Sarai proved to be. Having taken deliberate steps to bring a child into the world, they both shirked the responsibilities that the developing situation required. Sarai apparently was motivated by jealousy and Abram by cowardice.

Questions:

What is our responsibility when other people are in our care or dependent on our doing the right thing? Or dependent on our doing our job professionally and with expected skill? What about when we do our best, but things go wrong anyway?

Exodus 32:23-24: *“They said to me, ‘Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off’; so they gave it to me,*

and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”
(For context, read 32:1-35.)

If this were not such a tragic story, it would almost be funny. God called Moses, who was ramrodding the Israelites across the desert, to come up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments and other instructions. Before he left, Moses deputized his brother Aaron to be in charge during his absence. But Moses was gone longer than expected, and the people concluded they needed a visible god to protect them. They took the matter to Aaron, who instructed them to turn in their gold jewelry, and from it, he fashioned a golden calf, which the people proceeded to worship through feasting and debauchery. But just when the party was going strong, Moses reappeared and confronted Aaron about these vile doings. Aaron claimed that all he did was throw gold in the fire “and out came this calf.”

Gee, imagine that! Who would have thought it?

It is hard to respect Aaron in this situation. He laid the responsibility for this action, first, on the people -- “they are bent on evil” (v. 22) -- and, second, on bad luck -- “out came this calf.” The one place he did not lay it was where it most belonged, on his own shoulders. After all, though the people had instigated the idea, they could not have proceeded without Aaron’s cooperation. He was in charge. The buck stopped with him. But Aaron did not blame himself.

Questions:

If you were in Aaron’s place, what do you think you would have done when approached by the people? When confronted by Moses? Do you find it difficult to accept the responsibility for your sins and mistakes? Or do you too easily blame yourself? What’s the problem with that?

John 8:32: *“You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.”* (For context, read 8:31-36.)

The truth Jesus referred to here was the truth of God as revealed through him, but that truth is expressed in many applications. One of them is that God’s truth can free us to accept what we are responsible for and can also free us from taking too much responsibility.

If we would have a healthy relationship with responsibility, we need a dedication to truth. Christian writer Simone Weil put it like this: “Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.”

Question:

When has focusing on the truth of a matter helped you know how to respond?

Matthew 26:71-72: “... another servant-girl saw [Peter] and she said to the bystanders, ‘This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.’ Again he denied it with an oath, ‘I do not know the man.’” (For context, read 26:69-75.)

This is from Peter’s denial of Jesus after Jesus was arrested. The fact is, though, that Peter didn’t set out to deny Jesus; actually, he hadn’t even conceived of himself as ever denying his Master. That’s why, earlier that evening, when Jesus told Peter that his denials were coming, Peter had boldly replied, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” (Matthew 26:35). But under the pressure of circumstances, Peter did exactly that.

In truth, it’s hard for any of us to know how we will react under an extreme emergency, despite how we might picture ourselves behaving. In an editorial after 9/11, Scott Edwards of NPR referred to the heroics of many people that day. He went on to say that he didn’t know how he himself would react under similar circumstances, but added that his Quaker upbringing taught him the phrase, “I know which way I want to lean.”

Question: How do you strengthen your spiritual “leanings”?

James 3:1: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” (For context, read 3:1-5.)

In the early church, teachers played a necessary and critical role. Their prestige attracted many to follow the same career, but James here reminds his readers that teaching includes responsibilities that not many are fit to undertake. He’s not discouraging good candidates, but urging that those who don’t have the teaching gift seek a different career.

In light of the news, perhaps we could paraphrase this verse as “Not many of you should become cruise ship captains ...”

Question:

What special responsibilities come with your work? What measures do you take to ensure that you live up to those responsibilities?

For Further Discussion

1. A popular saying has it that it’s a lot easier to point the finger than the thumb. What does that mean?
2. Respond to this: Andy Capp is a comic strip character who spends most of his

time in the local pub. A cartoon awhile back showed Andy coming home very late at night. As he comes in the house, he meets his wife who is on the way to the door with the key. She says, “Oh, Hi’ yer Pet. I was just going to lock up. It got so late, I didn’t think you’d be home tonight.” Andy replies, “What? And have you worrying yourself sick? I wouldn’t put you through that, Kid. I think too much of you.” At which point Andy’s long-suffering wife says to the reader, “He’s like that. He always behaves responsibly once he’s exhausted all other alternatives.”

3. Have you ever had to respond in an emergency? As you reflect on it, what do you think of the way you responded?

4. If you are a first responder, does it help to have faced emergencies on many occasions when it comes to acting in difficult situations?

5. Some video recordings seem to show cruise personnel telling individuals to go back to their cabins because everything is under control. In light of this particular situation, are you more or less likely to trust those in authority in a time of emergency? Are you more or less likely to trust and grant power to those claiming authority in day-to-day situations? Why or why not?

6. Jesus provides salvation as a free gift, and invites us to trust him and cast all our cares on him. Cruise liners provide a service (travel and entertainment) for a fee, and ensure that the limits of what the owners are “on the hook” for are limited and spelled out in advance on the cruise ticket contract (see [What You Sign Away When You Buy a Cruise Ticket. Reuters](#)). Compare and contrast these differences.

Responding to the News

This is a good time to consider what our responsibilities really are (not just those that others assume are ours), and how we are handling them.

Closing Prayer

We thank you, Lord, that you are with us through all the emergencies of life. Give us the courage and faithfulness to do the things you have given us as responsibilities. In Jesus’ name. Amen.