

# Where Are the Seventeen?

By Mike Benson

It was in the early morning hours of September 8. Eyewitnesses say that it was a stormy evening on Lake Michigan. Nighttime navigation was always difficult in 1860, but especially so on this occasion. Gale-force winds made the trip all the more perilous. Passengers were nervous and with good reason.

Around 2:30 a.m., about twelve miles off the Illinois coast, the steamboat "Lady Elgin" was suddenly rammed by a large, wooden schooner. The "Augusta" had been laboring under the tempest and collided with her on the port side, just aft of her paddlewheel. Lady Elgin's crew attempted to plug the hole in the hull with a mattress, but to no avail. The breach simply could not be repaired and pounding waves quickly forced water into her oak-framed body.

Edward Spencer was on board the Lady Elgin when the accident occurred. He was a student from nearby Northwestern University and decided to help. Oblivious to the storm and its attendant dangers, Edward plunged into the icy waters and began rescuing fellow passengers. There had been approximately 485 patrons on board (the ship was rated to carry only 300 people); about 380 of them drowned on that awful day.

Edward lived--and so did seventeen other people whom he had saved during the deluge. However, the strain of the occasion exacted its toll on his young body. The nerves in his legs had been irreparably damaged during the mishap, and doctors were forced to confine him to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

On his 80th birthday, Edward's friends and family gathered to celebrate. Someone in his company asked him, "What is your most vivid memory about that tragic day?" He replied, "Not one of the seventeen returned to thank me."

I wonder which burden was more difficult for Edward to bear? Was it the lifetime loss of movement in his legs, *or* was it the thoughtless negligence of those seventeen unnamed passengers whom he had snatched from that watery tomb long ago?

In Luke 17, Jesus came in contact with a group of men who were suffering with leprosy. Their plight as well as their knowledge of the Lord's power prompted them to cry for help. Commenting on this incident, one author notes:

The law of Moses required those afflicted with the loathsome disease of leprosy to keep away from the rest of the people (Lev. 13:45-46). This is why they "stood afar off." Because lepers could not associate with others, they usually congregated together for the sake of association; and, in this instance, there were ten of them. One of them was a Samaritan; the others were Jews. Ordinarily, the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans; but, their common affliction had drawn them together. Leprosy

is one of the most dreaded and terrible diseases known to man. It starts with sores; then, it eats away at bodily tissues until the body itself begins to be consumed. The nose, the lips disappear; fingers decay and fall off; joint after joint separates, eventually, the vital organs cease to function and death follows. Those who had leprosy were regarded as ceremonially unclean; they were required to live outside the city; and, had to cry out 'Unclean! Unclean!' at the approach of others. The lepers remained at a distance because they were forbidden to draw near to others--this being a sort of quarantine to keep from infecting more with the disease. The lepers heard of the Lord; they know of His powers to heal; and they pleaded with Him to "have mercy" on them. Their deep sense of need led them to beg for whatever ministrations the Lord felt disposed to give them... Jesus heard the pitiful cries of these desperate men and was willing to help. He told them to go and show themselves to the priests... A person who was healed of leprosy was to show himself to the priest who made an offering for him and officially pronounced him clean (Lev. 14; Matt. 8:4). Though actually clean through the miraculous power of Christ, these lepers had to be made legally clean by compliance with the law of Moses in order to be allowed association with the people" (J. Noel Meridith, "Exhortations for Servants," *Luke: Fifth Annual Firm Foundation Lectureship*, William S. Cline, ed., '88, 414-415).

Ironically, despite the fact that Jesus had healed ten men, Scripture says that only the Samaritan came back and expressed his heartfelt gratitude. "Now one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks..." (vv. 15-16a).

I wonder what the Lord felt when that singular leper returned and said "thank you" (v.17)? Then too, I wonder how the Lord feels today when **we** fail to express gratitude for the "healing" (Isaiah 6:9-10; 1 Peter 2:24) he has granted us? He walked the lonely road to the cross; he gave his life as a ransom on our behalf. He made salvation possible to us all (Titus 2:11). But are we saying "thank you" in return? Where is our gratitude?

Church leaders lament low Sunday night attendance, poor contributions, the inability to find adequate Bible class teachers and the glaring lack of conviction for what is true and right. Congregations at times, seem more concerned about buying furniture, installing carpet and repairing plumbing than they do about the plight of men's souls (Matthew 16:26; cf. Acts 8:22) and eternity (Matthew 25:46). Could it be that we've forgotten about Edward Spencer? **Could it be that we've lost sight of the enormity of what Jesus did for us nearly 2,000 years ago on the tree** (Romans 5:15-18; 6:23; Ephesians 2:8)? When the apostle Paul considered his deliverance from the consequences of sin (i.e., death--Romans 6:23) he exclaimed, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 9:15)!

When we begin to recognize the sacrifice that was made on Calvary, we will stop thinking in terms of obligation and requirement. Our motivation to follow Jesus won't be prompted by command **alone**, but also out of an abiding gratitude that pours forth from our lives (James. 2:14-26). Thankfulness will be translated into loving, lifelong devotion and submission.

Do you need to say "thank you" to Jesus? Where are the seventeen? "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18; cf. Philippians 4:6; Colossians 1:12; 2:7; 3:17; 4:2; Hebrews 13:15).