

THE ALEWIFE OF DAMARISCOTTA MILLS

BY JIM RUDD



WHAT ARE ALEWIFE?

Also known as the **SAWBELLY**, wall-eyed herring, cat-thrasher. Damariscotta means “place of abundance of alewives” in Native American. Alewife have been protected by law to allow spawning since before the U.S. was the U.S. They grow in salt water, but they spawn in fresh water, similar to salmon, but much smaller.

Alewife have been harvested by hand nets from the early 1800’s until 1950 at Damariscotta Mills, which is located on the coast of Maine in the United States. In 1950, a big electric wench with a huge net was placed at the mouth of the Damariscotta River. The number of alewife decreased dramatically, but came back in force after an eight-year moratorium on catching them.

WHAT DO ALEWIFE HAVE TO DO WITH OUR CHRISTIAN WALK?

My wife and I found a **FISH LADDER** set up between the ocean and the Damariscotta River while we visited Damariscotta Mills during Memorial Day, which is coincidentally the season when alewife return to spawn. A fish ladder is a series of resting pools joined together by the stream running down. This particular fish ladder has a 42-foot vertical ascent from the ocean to Damariscotta Lake and is the only way the alewife can make the climb back up to their spawning grounds since the river was dammed to create the lake.

We found out a lot about the alewife from the caretaker of the ladder. He was your typical Mainer who spoke Maine-ish rather than English. He looked to be 95, acted 55 and was really 75 – your typical Mainer.

He told us about the alewife's journey. They were safe at sea until they got close to the coast. The seabirds seemed to know when they were coming to spawn as well and they swooped down on the great salt bay to grab the fish as they were arriving. From the top of the fish ladder you could see schools of alewife coming in from the sea while the birds fed on those alewife who strayed too close to the surface of the ocean.

Peter talks about how Christians also need to be careful as we follow our journey of life.

And when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, you shall receive a never-fading crown of glory. Likewise, younger ones, be subject to older ones, and all being subject to one another. Put on humility. For God resists proud ones, but He gives grace to the humble. Therefore be humbled under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your anxiety onto Him, for He cares for you. Be sensible and vigilant, because your adversary the Devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking someone he may devour. [1 PETER 5:4-8](#)

The alewife are safe from the birds once they reach the inside of the great bay. The trees along the shore protect them, but they are a long way from reaching their destination. There are **THREE RUNS** up from the bay, but only one of them is the ladder that will reach Damariscotta Lake.

THE FIRST RUN up is simple a dead end. The locals from Damariscotta have even put a wire fence over it to try to keep the alewife from going up that way, but the alewife found their way through this fence. The old Mainer said he spent time each day driving the alewife back down, but once they had chosen their path, they usually died following that path, just short of their goal. The caretaker said he drove the alewife back down every day because there were usually a few that would go back down and back up the other two ways.

Christians can also walk the path with God and come close to the goal, but get lost as they approach the end. Jesus spoke this parable:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after that which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say to you that likewise joy shall be in Heaven over one sinner who repents, more than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance. Or what woman having ten drachmas, if she loses one drachma, does she not light a lamp and sweep the house, and seek carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls her friends and her neighbors together, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the drachma which I had lost. Likewise I say to you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. LUKE 15:4-10

This old caretaker also found joy in the few alewife that he redirected, but always tinged with a little sadness for all the alewife that got so close to their goal and wound up being wasted.

THE SECOND RUN up leads to the electric hoist with the net on it. This was the widows' catch. They set this aside for the mariners' widows who either took their portion or sold it.

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corner of your field. And you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard. And you shall not gather the leavings of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am Jehovah your God. LEVITICUS 19:9-10

Although the alewife never made it home to spawn, they still served their purpose. At least their lives were not wasted like the alewife that chose the first path.

That left **THE ONE PATH**, the true path up.

Go in through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are who go in through it. Because narrow is the gate and constricted is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. MATHEW 7:13-4

But the journey was not finished for the alewife. It usually took more than one day for the alewife to make it up the 42-vertical feet of the fish ladder, and it was grueling day. Interestingly, the Mainer told us the alewife only swam during the daylight. Once, a "young kid" from the university (a.k.a.: a professional biology researcher) did not believe this old caretaker. So he stayed with this old Mainer one night for observations. The "college boy" saw some alewife make it out of the ladder and into the lake after sunset. The college boy pointed this out to prove the Mainer

wrong. To which the Mainer replied, "I didn't say sunset, I said dark." The college boy spent two nights with a flashlight to count the number of alewife who went into the lake at night. It was less than a dozen and all of those were right at the end of twilight. The alewife knew when darkness was coming and settled in to wait for the light.

Christians also have a light that they need to follow.

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it."

JOHN 1:4-5

And this is the condemnation, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the Light, because their deeds were evil.

For everyone who does evil hates the Light and does not come to the Light lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices truth comes to the Light so that his works may be revealed, that they exist, having been worked in God.

JOHN 3:19-21

Then Jesus spoke again to them, saying, I am the Light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. JOHN 8:12

The alewife need the light of the sun to find their way up, even though they had already traveled thousands of miles and were in the shallow pools right next to their goal. But they instinctively knew they could still get lost or come to harm without the light of the sun.

Christians also need to know they need the light of the Son of God, even if they are next to their goal or else they could get lost. But if they keep their eyes on the Son, they will walk the path God sets before them.

The path of the alewife up the fish ladder also shows a pattern of life. Some fish swim around the shallow pools along the ladder in

a small school. They went round and round, but then one alewife would lead the way up and a bunch of others would follow, but usually not all. We actually saw one group go up two pools in a row, yet there was a different leader each time the fish went from one pool to the next. Some fish waited in the pool they were comfortable in until they joined the next school and followed the next leader up. Or perhaps one of those that stayed behind guided the new school to the next pool on the journey.

Christians will also know who to follow as they journey from one pool to the next.

Truly, truly, I say to you, He who does not enter into the sheepfold by the door, but going up by another way, that one is a thief and a robber. But he who enters in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. The doorkeeper opens to him, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he puts forth his own sheep, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him. For they know his voice. And they will not follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. JOHN 10:1-5

Different Christians have different roles as they pass through this life. God gives talents to his called out people to help each other as they journey through life.

And truly He gave some to be apostles, and some to be prophets, and some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. And this until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a full-grown man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we no longer may be infants, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, in the dishonesty of men, in cunning craftiness, to the wiles of deceit. But that you, speaking the truth in love, may in all things grow up to Him who is the Head, even Christ; from

whom the whole body, fitted together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of each part, producing the growth of the body to the edifying of itself in love. EPHESIANS 4:11-6

Acts 6 shows that different Christians are given different tasks at different times but they all worked together for the edification of the body of Christ. God gives these gifts for a reason.

And being perfected, He became the Author of eternal salvation to all those who obey Him, being called by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek; of whom we have much to say, and hard to be explained since you are dull of hearing. For indeed because of the time, you ought to be teachers, you have need that one teach you again what are the first principles of the oracles of God. And you have become in need of milk, and not of solid food. For everyone partaking of milk is unskillful in the Word of Righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, even those who because of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. HEBREWS 5:9-14

As different leaders take the school of alewife they are currently with up the ladder, the goal is to reach the top, not to be the leader. But you can see some alewife are leaders, being much larger and older. Unlike the salmon, when the alewife reach the top and breed, they can come back down. Yes, most die on the way to do their jobs, but there are some elders who make their way back down the fish ladder and lead the school of young alewife back down to the sea to grow.

There is much growth for Christians in this world. Some churches have concentrated on bringing in people and have been wildly successful at this. But even they are realizing that they did not follow Jesus' admonition to, *"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things*

whatsoever I have commanded you.” MATTHEW 28:19-20. Yes, lonely, needy people have flocked into some of the mega-churches because the message of these churches is warm and welcoming, but does not include having the people in those churches learn to follow Godly ways. But Jesus did say his flock would grow.

And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But seeing the crowds, He was moved with compassion on them, because they were tired and scattered like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest that He will send out laborers into His harvest. MATTHEW 9:35-8

In that day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the seaside. And great crowds were gathered to Him, so that He went into a boat and sat. And all the crowd stood on the shore. And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, Behold, the sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside, and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth. And they sprang up immediately, because they had no deepness of earth. And the sun rising, they were scorched, and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns. And the thorns sprang up and choked them. And some fell on the good ground and yielded fruit, indeed one a hundredfold, and one sixty, and one thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. MATTHEW 13:1-9

The journey of the alewife back to Damariscotta Mills is long and arduous. The alewife need help on the way, and even with that help a large number of them die on the way. Some serve their purpose by feeding the widows and orphans, but far too many simply fall prey to the predators along the way or even follow the wrong path when they get close to home because they will not

change course and learn something new when the opportunity arises.

The lesson of the alewife is there for us today. We need the light of the Son to guide us, we need to watch out for predators along the way and we have to learn that we are never too old to learn and change. Different leaders will arise among Christians at different times to help blaze the path, but the Son has already traveled that path and awaits all Christians where he has arranged, *“a rest to the people of God.”* [HEBREWS 4:9](#)

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