

Their ship, the *Endurance*, had been crushed by the ice and sank to the bottom of the ocean. All 28 crewmembers managed to escape in three lifeboats, not sailing them but pushing and pulling them over the pack ice just north of Antarctica until they could dash across icy waters for an inhospitable place called Elephant Island. From there six men, including their leader, Sir Ernest Shackleton, set out in a modified lifeboat on a journey of 1,300 km (800 miles) over the most storm-swept water in the world. They were headed for South Georgia Island, the location of a whaling station and certain rescue. Although the men didn't have GPS for navigational support they managed to find the island in that wild ocean 14 days later but it took them another two days to land because of a hurricane, the same one that sunk a 500-ton steamer. Once on dry land, however, the men realized that their ordeal was far from over. The whaling station was still 27 km (17 miles) away on the other side of the island, and standing between them and safety were 2,900 meter (9,500 ft.) peaks and fissure-riddled glaciers. Normal people would have given up. Not Shackleton. He had promised his mates marooned on Elephant Island that he would come back to rescue them so he and two others hiked over the snow and ice covered mountains for 36 hours straight until they stumbled into the whaling station! When Shackleton returned to Elephant Island to pick up the rest of his crew they could hardly believe their eyes. Ten months had elapsed since the sinking of the *Endurance* (105 days since Shackleton had left them). Many were beginning to think that they would never see civilization again. Yet here was the "Boss" come back to rescue them.

The true story of Shackleton's heroics is a classic. His expedition failed to complete its goal of crossing Antarctica on foot but the misadventure turned into one of the greatest rescues of all time as not one crew member lost his life. As gripping as the tale of Shackleton and his crew are, it's not the world's greatest rescue. You were saved in the world's greatest rescue. That's what the Apostle Paul teaches us this morning. What makes this rescue so great is its objective and scope, as well as its effect. Let's find out more.

Paul describes the rescue mission like this: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly... Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him" (Romans 5:6, 9). This rescue mission is great because of its objective. God set out to save the ungodly. If your child were kidnapped, you would implore the authorities to spare no expense to rescue him or her. Do you feel the same way when surfers are told a hurricane is on the way, and there are dangerous rip currents everywhere, and they are out there surfing. One of them falls and is getting pulled out to sea. Should lifeguards have to put their lives on the line for that stupidity? What about the drug-crazed person who has driven a stolen truck into the alligator infested waters? Should a rescue team risk their lives to save him? Frankly, it doesn't seem worth it. Why should "good" people risk their life to save the bad? Why should police officers, for example, use their bodies as human shields to protect the serial murderer on his way to court?

Now consider again how Paul tells us that God set out to save people who don't deserve a pat on the back but a slap in the face. Paul is describing himself. He's describing me. And he's describing you. We are the ungodly. God has set definite boundaries for us to live and work within to keep everyone safe but we arrogantly think that those boundaries don't apply to us. Take Jacob for example. In our Old Testament lesson we see Jacob asleep with a rock under his head as a pillow. One wonders which of the two was harder – Jacob's head or his stone pillow?

(Chad Bird) You see Jacob had ignored God's promise to give him his father's inheritance even though he was the younger son. Instead of waiting, Jacob took matters into his own hands and tricked his blind father into giving him the inheritance. As a result Jacob had to hightail it out of his homeland because Esau, his older brother, vowed to kill him. Yet there God was – appearing to Jacob in that dream to say: “Jacob, you're my man and I'm your God.”

There's a lot of the lying Jacob in us, isn't there? Instead of telling our wife or husband the truth about something we did, we try to hide it from them, rather than face harsh words. Or we lie to our spouse about how we spent our time while they were gone. We don't want them to think all we did was just watch TV. When someone asks for help we make up a story of why we can't when the real reason is that we just don't want to be bothered. Do you see what's so amazing about this rescue God pulled off through his Son, Jesus? He didn't rescue cuddly little puppies but snarling dogs that snap at any hand that tries to guide them. It wasn't an easy or cheap rescue either. God didn't just wave a wand and forgive our sins. He sacrificed his own Son. Would you do that? Would you send your son to rescue a child molester if you knew your son would lose his life in the process? That's what God did...and for free. You'll never receive a bill in the mail for what God did to save you from hell fire.

Yes, this is the greatest rescue ever not just because of its objective - to save the ungodly, but also because of its scope. Jesus' death on the cross pays for the sins of the whole world. There is not one person here, or driving down Hebert right now, or doing time in a prison somewhere whose sins have not been forgiven by the blood of Jesus. For “While we were still sinners,” assures Paul, “Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8b).

When Shackleton finally made it to the whaling station do you know what he did first? He took a bath. How satisfying it must have felt to immerse himself in hot water after months out in the cold. How refreshing to scrub away the layers of soot that had caked his skin from using a seal blubber stove. Similarly what makes God's rescue so great is its effect. Paul explains: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). When an irresponsible skier is rescued after knowingly going out of bounds, I'll bet he gets a stern lecture from his rescuers. He may even be banned from skiing that resort again until he can “earn” back their trust somehow. That's not how God operates. Jesus' didn't save us only to turn around and demand that we now prove that we are worthy of his love. No, Jesus' rescue has brought us peace. No matter what foolish thing you did yesterday. No matter what boneheaded thing you said this morning. Everything is OK between God and you for Jesus' blood constantly cleanses us from our sins. No, as a Christian you won't take advantage of this love. You won't willingly go out and sin again any more than a rescued skier would take the first chance to ski out of bounds again.

But Jesus' rescue has given us more than peace. It's also given us joy. Paul wrote: “And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:2b). Someone once said that peace is joy resting, and joy is peace dancing. I think that's a good description. Jesus' rescue not only assures that you don't have to be afraid of God's punishment, it encourages you to look forward to the glories of heaven. It's like the parable of the prodigal son. When he returned, his father didn't put him on probation; he threw him a party! That's what Jesus has done for us. He's not only rescued us from a certainty in hell he's given us the certainty of heaven!

But wait, there's more. This joy won't just come once you've made it to heaven; it's yours right now. Paul wrote: "...but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3, 4). The Norwegian polar explorer Amundsen, a contemporary of Shackleton, was said to make regular trips across the snow and ice in Norway as a little boy to toughen him up for future polar explorations. It obviously worked. Amundsen was the first to discover a route through the Northwest Passage and the first to reach the South Pole. Is that why God lets us suffer - to "toughen us up"? No! God allows us to suffer to soften us. By nature we're hardwired to rely on ourselves. That's a recipe for disaster. Instead God wants us to despair of ourselves, to admit, "Lord, I can't do it. I can't go on. I need your help!" Indeed, God is there helping and sustaining us and God's love does not have skimpy days. Paul wrote: "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5). God does not grudgingly parcel out his love the way the Domino Pizza guy skimpily scatters cheese on his pizzas. God showers us with his love the way Mom showers her homemade crust with cheese so that every corner is covered. Likewise God's love has you totally covered. Jesus' death proves it. Would God abandon you after shedding his Son's blood to save you? No! Just like you wouldn't pay top dollar for a big screen TV and then leave it out on the porch to be ruined by the snow and ice.

Shackleton returned to England a hero but was then forgotten for many years. The public may have stopped thinking about Shackleton but the men once stuck on Elephant Island never did. In fact when Shackleton organized another polar adventure many of the Endurance crewmembers signed on. And why not? They trusted Shackleton with their lives. After all, hadn't he risked his life for theirs? Neither should we ever stop thinking about Jesus. He didn't just risk his life for us; he gave it. Why wouldn't we want to follow this leader wherever he takes us? For with Jesus leading we'll always have at least this: peace, joy, and hope. Peace with God. The joy of forgiveness. And the hope of eternal life. What more do we need? Nothing. Amen.