

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 ice fishermen are told by the DNR not to go on the ice, because it is extremely dangerous, and yet these icefishermen disregard the directives and find themselves trapped on an ice flow. Should thousands of dollars be spent rescuing them? What about the drug-crazed person who has driven a stolen truck into the icy river? 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 a 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. What he wants from us, what he demands of us is perfection. He wants people who always put the needs and wants of others first. He wants seasoned-citizens, for example, who use their wisdom and experience to encourage, not criticize. He wants husbands who cheerfully wash dishes, mow the lawn, and change diapers. He wants wives who are always happy to pick up the kids, and who aren't bitter that the monthly grocery bill doesn't allow for luxuries like spa treatments. He wants young people to serve their boss, customers, and Mom and Dad as if serving Jesus himself – always with a smile and looking to do

more than just the bare minimum. Have you fallen short in any of these areas? If so, your access to God has been cut off. It's not just that God ought now to ignore you, like an ATM machine ignoring your request for cash because there is none in your account. God ought to come after you, like prosecuting attorney goes after someone who has mercilessly shot and killed an employee at a local convenience store.

But God will not come after you. Why not? Listen to what Paul writes in the verses after our text: "6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...9 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) God will not come after us because he went after his own Son for our sins. At the cross, God the Father poured out his wrath for the world's sin on Jesus the way you and I might take out our frustrations on a punching bag after a tough day. Would you ever consider doing such a thing as God did? Would you give up your son, would you turn him away from your house so that the drunk driver who killed your daughter can live in his room and eat his food? Not in a million years! And yet this was the length that God went to so that our sins would be forgiven and that we would have full access to him! Why did God do it? He did it because he felt like it. That's grace.

Only by grace do we have access to the Triune God, and only through faith in Jesus, not faith in anything we have done, will we enjoy the blessings of this grace. Paul made that clear when he wrote: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Romans 5:1, 2a). Just as only the right password will give you access to your online bank account, so it's only through Jesus that we have access to God, and full access at that! Having full access to God means that you will never get a computerized menu of options, or an angel who puts you on hold when you want to talk to God. Through faith in Jesus you have direct access in prayer to the CEO of everything. Having full access to God means that you weren't given a spectator's ticket to the concert of God's grace; you have a backstage pass that allows you to get close and personal with God – as demonstrated in Holy Communion where we receive Jesus' body and blood.

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 in Colorado 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.