

The God who wants to rescue us

Well, let me try and draw you together again. And I thought it was time to come together, and we're going to focus on our big topic of the week. I said to you last week that we always pick one big idea, and the topic for this week is 'The God who wants to rescue us'.

And I thought I'd start tonight by asking you to imagine that, me in my generosity, I've decided to pay for every single one of us to go on an all-expenses cruise ship to the Caribbean. How does that sound? Does that sound good? Okay, some of you really have to use your imagination. You're thinking, 'How could this Scotsman be so generous?' but here we are. We're all going at my expense to the Caribbean and I have paid for luxury cabins, you have luxury - some of you are smiling - luxury food, you have the best of everything, okay?

Now, at one point I see you all. You've just had dinner. You've had a great feast and now you're in the ballroom, you're partying, you're having a great, great time. And then you notice that I have come into the ballroom and I come in to the middle of the floor, I raise my voice, you're having a great time dancing away, and I raise my voice and I say, 'I have found the lifeboats.'

Well, what do you think? Do you go, 'YES! Well done, Lee!?' Do you think to yourself, 'Yeah... I thought he was odd, but now... now I know for sure. Someone take him to the corner and just make sure he's quiet,?' It's odd, isn't it? If I just come and burst into the room and say, 'I have found the lifeboats,' and that's all I say, then it doesn't make any sense.

But just suppose that you're dancing the night away and I come into the ballroom and I say, 'Guys, sorry to disturb you, but I've just been outside and, d'you know that bump? That was an iceberg, and I've just spoken...'

(Audience laughter)

Global warming. It's amazing where the icebergs go.

'And I've spoken to the chief engineer, and he has assured me that the ship is going to sink. But I know the way to the lifeboats.'

Now, does that change anything? Of course it does. If I come into the room, and I first of all tell you that we are in great danger, if I first of all tell you that there is a big, big problem, and then I tell you I have found the way off, I have found the solution, then that changes things. If I suddenly come and say, 'I've got great news of salvation,' and yet don't tell you the problem, then it doesn't make any sense.

Well, tonight we're going to look at the greatest rescue mission of all, and I mean that, the greatest rescue mission of all: God's great rescue to save us from a big, big problem. But unless we understand what it is we need to be saved from and rescued from, then it won't seem like good news at all. So I hope that's okay. We're going to look at the problem and we're going to look at the solution, and we're going to do it from John's gospel, so if you've got a copy of John's gospel, do you want to turn with me to John chapter 3, and I'm going to read from verses 16-21.

So John chapter 3, and I'll read from verse 16. And this is Jesus speaking, and this is what he says: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Now the very first sentence that I read is one of those verses in the Bible that is supposed to stop us in our tracks. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." It's one of those bits of the Bible that we're supposed to go, 'Hang on a minute. Did you really say that?' It's supposed to grab our attention. We're supposed to gaze at it and think, 'Is that really true?' And yet, most of the time that's read, that's not what happens, is it?

Now there's different reasons for that: for some people it's just really familiar, so they just think, 'Yeah, okay. "For God so loved the world..." I've heard that before.' But for other people, because of how we see ourselves, because of how we view ourselves in God's sight, then it's not much of a shock, is it? Cause many people view themselves as lovely. And lovable. Is that not right? They may not say that to themselves when they look at themselves in the mirror, but actually deep inside they think of themselves as pretty okay. And therefore, why would God not love us?

Would you be, for example, shocked if I said to you tonight, publically, that I love my wife? Would you be thinking, 'Really? Can it be so? You love your wife?' And for those of you who know my wife, you know that she's very lovable to me and very lovely to me. So you're not going to say, 'Oh, hang on a minute. Did you really say, "I love my wife"?' You might say, "Pass the sick bag," but you're not going to say, {gasp} 'Horror!' That's the thing you'd expect me to do because of how she treats me.

Now, many people think, 'Well, why would God not love us? Surely we are lovely and lovable and kind and good. You know, why would God not want to make one of us His Facebook friends. Of course he wants to do that. Well, this is really important because if we consider ourselves as good and nice and kind, we will never see ourselves in need of rescue from God. And so I thought what would be good is just for us to consider for a few moments why it is that many people think of themselves as good in God's sight. Now, I think there are two main reasons why many people think of themselves as good. I think it's, first of all because the standards that we use are really low, and secondly because in many people's standard definition of being a good person there is no mention of how we treat God. Now, let me take those one at a time.

Think of the standard that we use. Many people's standards of goodness are just really, really low. Now, think about this. Just suppose that I had a great ambition to go to the Olympics. Do you think, 'Yup! You look like a strapping athlete,?' You think, 'Yeah. Why have you not gone to the Olympics before?'

And I decide that my particular field of expertise is going to be the high jump. Now I am dedicated and devoted, so what I do is that every single night I go home and outside in my back garden I make my own high jump. Okay, so I get the bricks up on either side and I get the clothes line or the clothes pole – obviously we're quite a rich household – so we put this up, and there it is here. And every night, what I do, I leap across. And I leap back and I call my wife and say, 'Look, I've leapt over it. Look at me! It's great. And I do it night after night.

And lo and behold, what happens... I join the British Olympic team. Oh, it's a proud moment. There I am, carrying the flag into the stadium. And then it's my event. It's the high jump. And I've been practising for so long. Now, what do I discover, to my horror, when I get there? They don't put the bar at this height, do they? They set the bar up here. So for all that time I met my own standards. Of course I met my own standards. The problem was, my standards were too low.

Now, so often when we think of goodness and how we treat other people, our standards are just really low. People think, 'I'm a good person. Why? Well, because I keep myself to myself, I don't do anyone any harm, I just kind of get on with life.' Well, those are not the standards of God, and how we treat other people. God wants us to be loving actively towards them, to not insult them by the words that we say. So you may not have physically hurt someone, but how many of us have uttered words that have really hurt and ruined people? Our standards are just so low. And God's standards are up here.

Now, you might think to yourself, 'Why does God care how we treat other human beings?' Well, just think about this. Have you ever had a relative who you know has been hurt or insulted by someone else? Does that not get you? Of course it does, because you care for them, you love them, and when someone hurts someone you care about, of course it gets you. Well, what did we discover last week? We discovered that our God is responsible, the Creator of everything. They're His. And therefore when we insult other people and hurt them, He cares. The first reason that we often think of ourselves as good: because our standards are so low.

Now, the second reason is because of how many people define goodness. Think about this. If you had to kind of walk down the street randomly, and just stop a stranger and say, 'Tell me...' - I know this sounds a bit weird and you perhaps shouldn't do this, but just say, 'How would you define goodness?' What would they say?

Well, they would often talk about how they treat other people. Often it is, 'I keep myself to myself and I don't do anyone any harm,' but time and again, when you listen to what they say, well, they don't mention God, do they? They don't mention how we treat our creator. So it's all very much horizontal. There's no vertical relationship with God. But it's really important for us to consider how it is that we treat our God. How do we treat the God who gives us everything? How do we treat the God who we discovered last week provides everything we need, who gives us every single breath we take? How do we treat that God?

Well, most people haven't really had a big bust-up with God, have they? Most people haven't kind of shaken their fist at God and shouted angry things at him. Some people have. But most of us just get on with life and ignore Him. We just get on and live in His world and we decide how we'll live. I think if there was one person who came up with a theme tune that summarises how we live, it's got to be Frank Sinatra, hasn't it?

"Regrets. I've had a few. But then again, too few to mention. I did what I had to do. I saw it through without exemption. I planned each chartered course, each careful step along the byway. And more, much more than this..." Can you finish it? "I did it..."

AUDIENCE: "My way."

LEE: Of course you can. "I did it my way." It's a great summary of the theme tune of many people's lives. Now, that doesn't mean that we never do what God says. Of course we do what God says sometimes, but think about why that is. We do it because so often we think, 'Yeah, I like that. That sounds reasonable to me. And therefore I'll do it.' But the real test of who's in charge of our life is when we come across something that God says, and we say, 'I don't think so.' That really shows you who's in charge of our life. When we come across something that God says, that we think is either old-fashioned or just not right for us today.

Now, you might be thinking to yourself, 'Well, what is wrong with living like this? What is wrong with singing 'My Way'? Surely that's just personal preference. Many in our culture would call it self-expression. We might even simply say it's just like growing up. What is wrong with living in God's world and singing the theme tune of 'My Way'?

Well, just imagine this. Imagine for a moment someone who owns a beautiful property. Okay, it's a great house, it's luxurious, and they have spent all their money making sure the best is there. You got that in your imagination? The best sofas, the best cooker, the best floors, the best carpets... These are the kind of carpets you kind of walk around, you think, 'Ooh-ooh! That's lovely!'

Now, this property owner, they want to have some tenants in the house. And they're going to provide everything. They're going to make sure they're looked after, all their electricity and gas is going to be paid for, and they want some tenants. So they get some tenants in this glorious house, and you know what happens? Every single week there's a package arrives from the property owner with a little present. It's great. He really does look after them.

But he never hears from them. He never receives any rent for living in the property. He never hears anything at all. He writes to them, he wonders if they're okay, but nothing, nothing, nothing. So he decides to go and visit them. And he gets there, and he gets his keys out and he tries to get in, and to his horror, he discovers that the locks have been changed. Well, he knocks on the door, he bangs on the door, and he says, 'Hello!' And he sees the curtains, and then there's a few shouts out, 'What are you doing here? What business is it of yours to come here?' 'Well, it's my house. I want to see you're okay.' 'Oh, get off the property. It's ours! We don't want you around.'

But he pleads with them and he gets in the door. And as he opens the door, he discovers all those letters that were written, ignored. He walks through and his eyes are opened because he looks at the devastation around. He's told them how the place should be looked after, how the place should be treated, and it's a mess. You know, they've trashed the telly, they've trashed the sofa, there's just rubbish everywhere, it looks a complete and utter disaster. And then they discover all sorts of notes are across the wall about how unkind he is, about how tyrannical he is...

Now, what are you thinking at the minute? Are you thinking, 'Well, what right does he have to come into this place and...?' No, you're thinking, 'There's something not right about that.' Absolutely.

Well, think about how this connects with God. We are in God's world, living in God's world. He's a beautiful, wonderful Creator. He provides everything for us, and yet how do we treat Him? So often we live in His world, we ignore Him, we don't give Him the praise and glory and honour that He deserves, we trash His world, we hurt His creatures... How do you think he's going to respond?

Well, I guess the big question is this: will God ever turn up? Or will He just leave it to go on and on? Well, the Bible promises that there is a day when every single one of us will stand before our creator and have to give an account of how we have lived in His world.

Now, I don't think that is bad news. I think that's actually really good news. Do you not long for a day of justice? You know when you turn on the telly and open the newspapers and see all the different horrifying things in the world, and people who do wicked things seem to get away with it. And you think, 'I want a day of justice.'

Do you not want a day of justice, when wrongs will be righted? That is a good thing. We want that to happen. But what we really want on that day of justice is that we want to be in God's court, but whereabouts? We want to be in the gallery, don't we? That's where we want to be. We want a day of justice, but we want to be in the gallery looking down at people getting what they deserve. And yet God says, 'No. Every single one of us will be in the dock.'

Now, what will happen to us? Well, we know serious crimes deserve serious punishment. And what could be more serious than living in God's world, ignoring Him, insulting Him, hurting His creatures and trashing his world? What could be more serious than rebelling against our Creator? The world calls it self-expression, reaching your potential. The Bible calls it rebellion against our loving Creator. What do we deserve? What will happen? Well, without Jesus, as we will discover, we are destined to face eternal anger. Cast out from God's presence. Cast out from His love. And yet to experience His rightful judgment for all eternity.

And yet... Here's the good news. Remember I said... Backdrop of bad news. You've got to understand that. But here's the good news. Look again at verses 16 and 17. I think this is amazing. We've read them before, but against the background of what we have just read, hear these words again: "For God so loved the world..." What kind of world? A world that's treated Him like this. That's the kind of world God loved. And how did He love it? Well, "he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

So 2000 plus years ago, God the Father sent his only Son on the most dramatic rescue mission of all out of love for us. And it was that rescue mission to save us from that rightful judgment that we

deserve. Now the question is, how is it that Jesus can save us from the judgment that we deserve? Well, open this book. Read through the pages, and what are you going to discover? The climax, the centre of Jesus' rescue mission just seems odd to us. Cause it's all heading towards his death on the cross. It's just unusual, isn't it? Sometimes you think of superheroes, and they come and they fly in and dramatically save people, and Jesus comes, and he says 'I'm going to save you by dying on a cross.' That's odd. It's weird.

How does it work? Well, if you cast your mind back to what we were thinking about earlier tonight, we were looking at Jesus as the Passover lamb. We thought of the story in the older part of the Bible when God's people were in Egypt, and when they deserved to experience God's judgment, and yet God provided a way to be rescued. A lamb had to be killed. And if it was killed and the blood was spread on the doorposts, God would pass through and yet would pass over a house where the lamb had been sacrificed, and God's anger would pass over because a lamb, a substitute, had been sacrificed.

Who is Jesus? He's the Lamb of God, who comes to be our Passover lamb. So as he died on the cross, once and for all, he would take the judgment that people like you and me, rebels like you and me deserve... He would be a substitute. A sacrifice.

And we all know what a substitute is. If you've got your favourite team or your favourite sport and there's a player on the pitch and you know they are rubbish, what are you shouting at the screen? 'Bring on the substitute! Why are you not bringing the substitute on?' And we know what it means. A substitute comes to take someone's place. Well, Jesus as the Passover lamb came to take our place. He was perfect. And yet he wasn't a lamb, was he? Who was he? He was the eternal Son of God.

So you ask yourself, 'How can one person possibly take the judgment for billions of others?' Well, think about who he was. He is the divine, eternal Son of God, infinitely valuable, paying the price for how we have lived.

Now, that is amazing, isn't it? But it is not automatic. Look at verse 18. It's wonderful, but it's not automatic. Verse 18, Jesus says: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." I love the first two words of that sentence. The first one: 'Whoever'. This is wonderful, isn't it? 'Whoever.' So Jesus says it doesn't matter what you've done in the past. It doesn't matter which culture you come from, what is the colour of your skin, what is the creed that you believe... It makes no difference at all: 'Whoever'.

And I love the second word: 'Whoever believes'. So he doesn't say, 'Whoever is good enough. Whoever tries hard enough. Whoever earns enough points to get into heaven, that'll be okay.' He simply says, 'Whoever believes in me.' Not just vague belief, but belief in him. Now, what does that mean? It doesn't mean believing things about him. It doesn't mean simply believing that Jesus existed. It means personal trust in Jesus. It means surrendering to him. It means actively trusting in him. It means coming to Jesus as we are, not cleaning up our life first, but just coming as we are and putting him in charge. That's what believing means. And Jesus says, 'Whoever believes in me is not condemned.' But it's not automatic. He has died, but we've got to come to him to benefit from his rescue.

Now, a way of understanding this would be this: Just imagine, if I can take you back to that ship that we began with, and to my lifeboat illustration. So there we are. We're on a sinking ship. We know we're on a sinking ship, we believe it's going to go down, we know that we need to get off. And we know that there is a lifeboat. Now... what do we do now? Well, there are different things you could do. You could, for example, just sit or stand and stare at the lifeboat for ages. Staring. You might even like lifeboats. It could be that you're the type of person that would subscribe to Lifeboat Monthly. You know, that could be your magazine. Or what you could do is get a few friends around and think, 'Do you like lifeboats? Excellent. Do you like lifeboats? Do you want to

come and talk about lifeboats with me? Excellent.' And you could just stare at lifeboats for a long time and you could understand everything there is to know about lifeboats. But will you be safe? No. Because what have you got to do? You've got to step inside. That's all you've got to do.

Jesus says, 'Whoever believes in me.' Whoever steps into the boat will be rescued.

Well, I think I've given you enough to think about tonight, so why don't you go back into your groups and chat over some of the stuff and see where you get to.

Identity – Who is God? Who are we?

© Lee McMunn, 2011

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

Published by 10Publishing, a division of 10ofThose Limited.

All English scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible: New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

10Publishing, a division of 10ofthose.com
Unit 19 Common Bank Industrial Estate, Ackhurst Road, Chorley, PR7 1NH, England.
Email: info@10ofthose.com
Website: www.10ofthose.com