

## Human Chain Rescues Nine Caught in Rip Current

*The Wired Word for the Week of July 23, 2017*

### In the News

Roberta Ursrey nearly lost her family at a beach outing at Panama City Beach, Florida, recently. She heard her two sons scream for help from the water and swam out to rescue them, only to find herself caught up in the same rip current they were battling. Ursrey said later, "I honestly thought I was going to lose my family that day. It was like, 'Oh God, this is how I'm going.'"

Another beachgoer, Jessica Simmons, saw the family in distress. She remembers thinking, "These people are not drowning today. It's not happening. We're going to get them out." Though an experienced swimmer, she quickly realized she could not rescue the family by herself. With her husband Derek, she organized an impromptu human chain (accounts vary as to the number of participants, but some say as many as 80). Simmons swam from the end of the chain out to the struggling swimmers and hauled them one by one on a bodyboard back to the chain; as she swam back for others, the rescuers passed each person along the chain to shore. By working together, they pulled Ursrey's family, including her husband, mother, nephews and sons, as well as at least one rescuer who was overcome, to safety.

Simmons later described the event: "To see people from different races and genders come into action to help total strangers is absolutely amazing! People who didn't even know each other went hand in hand in a line, into the water to try and reach them."

Rosalind Beckton administered CPR to Ursrey's mother, who had suffered a heart attack during the rescue. She is now home after a stay in the hospital. Later Beckton shared, "I witnessed many brave citizens risking their safety and their lives to form this human chain. It was amazing and heart-warming to see."

The rescuers insist they are not heroes but responded as anyone would have. A joy-filled televised reunion of some of those involved in the incident made for a wonderful, feel-good story in the midst of other, more disturbing world events.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Florida Family Rescued by Beachgoers' Human Chain. \*BBC\*](#)

[Amazing Human Chain Formed to Rescue Drowning Family in PCB. \*Northwest Florida Daily News\*](#)

[Good Samaritans Form Human Chain to Rescue Swimmers Caught in Rip Current Off Florida Coast. \*ABC\*](#)

[Human Chain Rescues Trapped Swimmers. \*CNN\*](#)

### Applying the News Story

On one hand, we are surprised by people who risk their lives to save others, and deem them heroes. On the other hand, it seems normal to expect people to do so; indeed, we might think worse of those who stood safely to the side and did nothing. President Abraham Lincoln famously appealed to "the better angels" of our nature. While it might seem that such an appeal is often in vain, this news story shows ordinary people making good -- even heroic -- choices to rescue others. It raises the question: Are we basically good, as indicated in the Creation account of Genesis 1? Or are we depraved, as generations of theologians have understood the Genesis 3 story of the Fall to indicate?

Additionally, to what extent are we willing to work with people very different from ourselves in service to the greater good?

## The Big Questions

1. Have you ever needed to respond immediately when another was in danger? When did someone respond decisively when you were in jeopardy?
2. Some news stories referred to those who risked their lives as "Good Samaritans." This idiom is commonly used without recognition that it would have struck Jesus' listeners as a contradiction in terms, since Jews did not consider Samaritans "good." Are there individuals or members of groups you would not want to be rescued by, even at the cost of your life? Have you heard of other rescuers and rescued people who, ironically, were members of opposing groups?
3. Some might point out that signs were posted warning of rip currents, and might assert that if some people ignore those signs, they deserve what they get. Do some people not deserve salvation -- whether physical or spiritual? Should lives be risked and potentially lost to benefit those who have put themselves in danger? What limits would you set for helping others?
4. There are over 7 billion people on the planet. People lose their lives in accidents every day. Had any of those in distress or their rescuers died, the overall world population would not have been affected. Do individual lives matter? Are all lives of equal value and equally worth saving in your eyes? In God's eyes?
5. Should Christian individuals, congregations and denominations strive to work with those of differing traditions and beliefs in order to serve -- and even save -- others? To what extent is it important to hold to one's own convictions so staunchly that it might even mean not participating in a joint service or mission effort?

## Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### Luke 15:4

*[Jesus said,] "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"* (For context, read 15:1-6.)

This is one of a trio of parables Jesus told when religious authorities complained that he was eating with sinners. Here Jesus speaks about the importance of the shepherd going to rescue one sheep out of 100 that has gotten lost. In so doing, does the shepherd prioritize, or place a higher value on, the lost sheep over those who have not strayed?

**Questions:** If you were one of the 99 sheep who stayed with the shepherd, how might you feel about being left while the shepherd went off to rescue the one that did not stick with the flock? If you had been on the Florida beach with a family member who ran into the gulf to join the human rescue chain, would you have felt nervous about being left behind, or about what might become of your own loved one? Do those who ignore safety regulations (such as rip current warnings) have a right to health and rescue services?

### Matthew 6:26

*[Jesus said,] "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"* (For context, read 6:25-30.)

This verse from the Sermon on the Mount is about avoiding worry, but these words of Jesus also make an important statement about the value of a human being. Some would argue about whether people are more

valuable than animals (just ask an avid dog lover), but might this verse also challenge us to re-evaluate the value of every human being, regardless of gender, race, culture, political affiliation, age, disability, etc.? There is a basic value that transcends the barriers we put up to separate ourselves into categories.

**Questions:** Do all human beings share the same worth? If you had to decide between saving a younger person and an older person, which would you choose? Would you consider a Christian to be worth more than a non-Christian? Would you save someone you know over someone you don't know? What value do you place upon your own life?

### **Genesis 1:26, 31**

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ...." ... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (For context, read Genesis 1:1--2:4a.)*

### **John 1:29**

*The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (No context needed.)*

While God sees that each new thing he creates is "good" (e.g., v. 4), after making humankind in his own image, God recognizes Creation as "very good." But it didn't stay that way for long. Genesis 3 describes the first sin, the story understood by many theologians through the centuries as the "fall" that corrupted not only humanity but the entire world. On the other hand, some Christians believe that Genesis 1-11 describes a series of sins that caused humanity to drift away from God bit by bit rather than in one fell swoop.

When Jesus is proclaimed the one who will take away the "sin" of the world, it is worth noting that the word is singular, not plural. In this sense, sin is a condition of the world. Whether humans are merely caught in a web of sin, or perpetrators of sins (plural: specific harmful acts), it is indisputable that we don't always opt to serve others instead of ourselves. Indeed, we can all recount many cases of people banding together to do evil, not good. (For a biblical example, see the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:1-9.)

**Questions:** In general terms (no need to name names), discuss people you know who seem to be good souls -- not perfect, but genuinely good people. How about people who do seem to be what we might call "fallen"? Where do you think you fit into those categories? Do you know people you could count on to rescue you? Do you know people you suspect would do nothing for you if you were in danger?

### **1 John 4:12**

*No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (For context, read 4:7-12.)*

### **Philippians 4:13-14**

*I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. (For context, read 4:9-19.)*

In the first scripture, John the Presbyter writes to a fellowship that is struggling with conflict between members with very different viewpoints about faith. He is suggesting that imitating God's love for us by loving each other is far more important than the things that divide us.

In the second scripture, Paul the Apostle, writing from prison, is also addressing a congregation struggling with conflict. Like John, he exhorts them to return to the love and joy they knew at their founding, and he thanks them for the tangible ways they made their love come alive by sharing his distress.

**Questions:** Both biblical writers would say that love can be demonstrated in action. How important is it to you that your actions reflect your beliefs, especially in times of crisis? Do you think others would say of you that they met God in your actions?

### **Romans 3:23**

*... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* (For context, read Romans 3:21-26.)

### **Psalms 8:5**

*Yet you have made [humans beings] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.* (For context, read vv. 1-9.)

People who believe that humans are basically depraved tend to hang their hats on specific verses in Romans, tying them together like a connect-the-dots puzzle. Indeed, this series of verses is sometimes referred to as "The Roman Road," a clear path to salvation. In contrast to this low view of humanity, other portions of Scripture, such as Psalm 8, celebrate a high view of humanity. In some ways it seems as if this tension between two extremes might be intentional.

**Questions:** Are we capable of heroic action apart from God, or does God make human heroism possible? While it is important to give God the glory for the parts grace and faith play in our choices, how does theology that paints a lower view of human nature affect people with low self-esteem? How do we balance the tension between scriptures that seem to present different viewpoints on the same topic?

### **For Further Discussion**

The appearance of some of the rescuers and the rescued on television had a celebratory air, and it is important that good news such as this be broadcast. However, if only some of those in distress had been rescued, or if some of the rescuers had died in the attempt, what sort of coverage do you think the news would have received? Are people only considered heroes if they are 100 percent successful?

### **Responding to the News**

Does your congregation work with other churches in ministries like food pantries, domestic violence shelters or care centers during disease outbreaks or natural disaster? Take time now to consider ways you as individuals and as a congregation might form a figurative chain with others in your community to assist people in need when a crisis arises.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, we pray that we might be ready when called upon to do more, to be more, than we ever imagined we might do and be. May we respond decisively when you grant us the opportunity to witness in your name, not only through our words but through our actions. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Other News This Week**

## **Sideways Elevator May Lead to Taller Buildings**

### **In the News**

Last week we learned of a German elevator company that is testing a new technology that may transform the way we design, create and navigate urban environments.

"For 150 years, elevators have been dominated by ropes," says Andreas Schierenbeck, CEO of ThyssenKrupp Elevator. While a conventional elevator can only move one car vertically in a shaft, controlled by steel cables

and pulleys, ThyssenKrupp's MULTI system simultaneously moves multiple cabins horizontally, vertically and, conceivably, diagonally, propelled by magnetic levitation.

The MULTI system currently in testing at the company's 807-foot-tall concrete test tower moves cabs along magnetic tracks using rotating "exchangers" to change direction from vertical to horizontal. The technology is reminiscent of round-houses used to transfer rail cars from one track to another.

"Buildings are becoming like vertical cities," says Markus Jetter, Head of Research for ThyssenKrupp, "and they need a flexible transport system similar to a metro."

By the end of this century, it is estimated that 70 percent of the world's population will be city-dwellers. Taller, more efficient buildings with better ways to transport people from one level to another will be needed in the future.

The cables that control traditional elevators add considerable weight to buildings, restricting their height, compared to the lighter-weight, ropeless technology used by MULTI.

Traditional elevators can make up as much as 40 percent of a building's core. The MULTI reduces the amount of space needed for elevators, since multiple cabs can use the same shaft. That means as much as 25 percent more square footage would be available for residential or business use with the MULTI system.

MULTI could also provide greater accessibility for the mobility-challenged and increase the capacity of mass transit systems to move more people more efficiently without requiring larger stations.

Daniel Safarik of the Council on Tall Buildings believes the technology could be useful in a medical, educational or government complex, to shuttle people horizontally from one building to the next.

Rick Sayah, vice president of the New Jersey elevator consulting firm Van Deusen & Associates, voiced concerns about "safety, training and maintenance" as well as about "what the technology exactly is, and who should regulate it: Is this an elevator? Is it a vertical extension of the transit system? Will it require a new paradigm of building code?"

ThyssenKrupp has just sold its first MULTI to OVG Real Estate, which is building the residential East Side Tower in Berlin scheduled to open in 2019. The elevator company hopes to obtain a safety certificate for the MULTI system once tests with people inside the cabins are completed in a few months.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[\*A New Era of Mobility in Buildings. ThyssenKrupp Elevator\*](#)  
[\*Can a Sideways Elevator Help Designers Build Taller Skyscrapers? \(includes video\). The Atlantic\*](#)  
[\*Climb Inside the Sideways Elevator \(includes video\). Popular Mechanics\*](#)  
[\*The Sideways Elevator of the Future Is Here, and It's Wild. Wired\*](#)  
[\*This Elevator Can Go Sideways \(video\). CNN\*](#)

## **The Big Questions**

1. Share about a time when you were moving in one direction spiritually and ended up in a completely different place than you expected.
2. As a general rule, how eager are you to try new things or to welcome change? When your normal routine is disrupted, how do you typically react?

3. What is the role of tradition in the church? How might tradition add value to your spiritual life? When might tradition hinder spiritual health and growth?

4. How does your church handle change? Would you describe your congregation as "risk-averse" or as "early adopters" of innovation?

5. How does change figure into the message of the Bible, and of the gospel of Jesus Christ in particular?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Isaiah 42:9, 16**

*See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them. ...  
I will lead the blind  
by a road they do not know,  
by paths they have not known  
I will guide them.  
I will turn the darkness before them into light,  
the rough places into level ground.  
These are the things I will do,  
and I will not forsake them. (For context, read 42:1-9, 16-20.)*

#### **Isaiah 43:18-19**

*Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert. (For context, read 43:16-21.)*

Isaiah speaks here of the Servant of the Lord, who is sent by God to open the eyes of the blind (42:7) and to lead them on an unfamiliar pathway (42:16). Yet this Servant is described as blind as well (42:19-20). We read in Mark 14:65 that Jesus was blindfolded and abused during his trial, which reminds us of this passage in Isaiah. Jesus willingly entered our human experience, sharing our suffering, so that he could help us in our time of testing (Hebrews 2:17-18).

**Questions:** What is the road the spiritually blind do not know, by which Jesus the Servant of God promises to guide them? What former things of old do you need to forget and put behind you? What new thing is God doing that is springing forth now?

#### **Luke 14:10-11**

*[Jesus said,] "But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (For context, read 14:7-14.)*

Once when Jesus was having a Sabbath meal with a leader of the Pharisees, he noticed how guests jostled for the seats of honor. So he told a pointed parable about wedding guests who got to the reception hall first so they

could sit at the head table, only to be asked to sit elsewhere when more important guests arrived. Sometimes we head one direction, hoping to advance ourselves, only to end up humiliated. "Pride goes ... before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18, NKJV).

The principle in verse 11 is found throughout scripture (Luke 18:9-14; James 4:6, 10; 1 Peter 5:5-6), that those who exalt themselves will end up in a completely different place than the destination they hoped to reach. Meanwhile, those who humble themselves are surprised to find themselves exalted. While moving in one direction, they end up in another place unexpectedly.

Jesus himself experienced this reversal of fortune, as Paul tells us in Philippians 2:5-11. He humbled himself, moving to the lowest place of service and self-sacrifice, and consequently was lifted up and highly exalted.

**Questions:** When have your pride and ambition gotten you into trouble? When has God surprised you with his mercy, when you felt most unworthy of his grace? How did you react as a recipient of his love?

### **Ephesians 4:22-24**

*You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (For context, read 4:14-32.)*

After outlining the gospel in glorious theological terms earlier in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul expounds on its application for everyday life. Once we have received the amazing gift of Christ, how can we remain the same? Our passions, thoughts and actions are to be transformed so that our new self, created in Christ, feels the way God feels, thinks the way God thinks, and acts the way God acts.

Practically speaking, that means that liars put away prevarication and learn to speak the truth; thieves stop stealing and work to provide for the needy; those prone to criticize learn to encourage; those who are bitter, angry and hateful put aside desire for revenge, spite and unforgiveness and learn to be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving.

**Questions:** How has your encounter with Jesus changed the way you feel, think and act already? What aspect of your "old self" still lingers, that you need to put away to make room for the "new self"?

### **Mark 2:21-22**

*[Jesus said,] "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins." (For context, read 2:18-22.)*

Jesus made this statement in response to a question people had about why he and his disciples didn't fast as John's disciples and the Pharisees did. He replied that guests at a wedding wouldn't fast at that time; to fast would be inappropriate at a time of celebration. Jesus wasn't saying that fasting was wrong or bad; he himself fasted for 40 days following his baptism. But he was saying that there is a time and a season for everything, and we need to understand the times and the seasons to know what behavior is fitting. Jesus wasn't saying that old things were bad, only that the time for certain practices and traditions is limited.

The religious leaders of the day wanted Jesus to fit into their idea of what a rabbi should be like, and when he defied their expectations, they couldn't accept it.

When God ushers in the new thing he is doing in his kingdom, we shouldn't try to force that new thing into an old framework, or we will lose both the new thing and the old framework. Instead, value past experiences and

traditions for what God taught us through them, but be open to new experiences and teachings God may have for you.

**Questions:** What traditions in your church do you cling to, even though you wonder about their efficacy at times? Are there certain practices, activities, committees, etc. that have outlived their usefulness but that are still part of your religious practice? Why do we find it so hard to let go of some things in our congregational life?

### **Mark 8:34-35**

*[Jesus] called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (For context, read 8:31-38.)*

Ken Medema, a prolific Christian singer-songwriter who was blind from birth, wrote this lyric about the strange exchange to which the Lord invites us:

*Finding leads to losing,  
Losing lets you find,  
Living leads to dying,  
and life leaves death behind.  
Losing leads to finding,  
there's nothing more to say,  
no one will find life another way.*

Ken commented [in his blog](#), "There is no more potent word from Jesus than that one about losing and finding. ... It relates to all the letting go that we continue to need to do all our lives; letting go of pride, misconceptions, lies we love, destructive cultural expectations, and the list could go on forever. It also relates to all that we might find in the process: rest, new purpose, some peace, forgiven relationships, new freedom in partnerships."

**Questions:** How did Jesus model the paradox in this passage from Mark? What have you lost because you began to follow Jesus? What have you found that surprised you?

### **For Further Discussion**

Reflect on this from Annie Dieselberg, leader of a ministry to women who have been forced to work on the streets in the sex trade in Asia: "God is always doing amazing things and working through us. At times we feel very discouraged. Leading organizations like this can honestly be very very hard. I know if God had told me in advance what (or who) I would have to deal with I would have been too scared and felt too unprepared. But God does appoint and God does equip and He is the one who sustains us through the ups and the downs, the disappointments and the joys."

Have you ever found yourself in a place of service wondering how you wound up there, thinking, "I didn't sign up for this!?" What did you learn about yourself in that situation? About God?

### **Responding to the News**

Listen to the song "[Things I Will Do](#)," by Phil Keaggy, and reflect on God's promise to do something new for his people. [Here are the lyrics](#). Take time to pray that God will help you see his hand in the various seasons and directions of your life.

### **Prayer**

Holy Spirit, transform us by renewing our minds and conforming us to the likeness of our Lord Jesus, who humbled himself as a human being, taking on the role of a servant, even accepting the humiliation of death by crucifixion. Give us such a Christlike character that we would willingly suffer so others might know the joy of salvation through Christ our Lord and the height and depth, length and breadth of the love of God our Father. Amen.

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