

SHAPING SPLENDOR FROM THE CLAY OF ADVERSITY

"Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success."

Surprisingly, this terse advertisement drew several thousand applicants for British explorer Ernest Shackleton's expedition to Antarctica in December 1914. He handpicked 27, and they would involuntarily suffer far more than the words forebode.

Having been previously beaten in the race for the South Pole, Shackleton launched this expedition to be the first to cross the 1,800-mile Antarctic expanse--on foot. Difficulties arose immediately, however, as their ship gradually became completely icebound. As one crewmember noted, it was "like an almond in toffee."

And there the sturdy ship remained wedged for 10 months--until icy jaws crushed it like an eggshell. The men abandoned ship to spend another five months marooned on drifting floes. Salvaging only what was practical, Shackleton even cast away the Bible the Queen had given him.

One crewmember's diary gives a peek at daily life. "It's a hard, rough, jolly life, this marching and camping; no washing of self or dishes, no undressing, no changing of clothes. We have our food anyhow; sleeping almost on the bare snow and working as hard as the human physique is capable of doing on a minimum of food."

Further melting eventually compelled evacuation in three small lifeboats. They drifted north to open water and sailed to Elephant Island, no more than a bleak piece of rock. From there Shackleton and five others immediately set out in the best of the boats to reach a whaling station on South Georgia Island. Amazingly, they survived the 800-mile journey through the world's roughest seas in a little boat not even 23 feet long.

When they spotted South Georgia after two weeks of incredible navigation, their water supply was long-depleted. But discouragement quickly displaced initial elation as a full-blown hurricane denied landfall--and assured two more agonizing days of thirst. Exhausted and spent, they finally debarked on an uninhabited part of the island.

But twenty-six miles of mountains and glaciers lay between them and the whaling station. With only the roughest of makeshift equipment, they completed the ordeal in merely 36 hours, a record that still stands. They stumbled into the station nearly starved, suffering from frostbite and clad in rags. In August 1916, Shackleton returned to Elephant Island to rescue the remaining crew. Miraculously, all were safe.

I hope to never suffer the hardships that Shackleton and his crew experienced. But an eye on our world situation warns me that creature comforts could be snatched away in an instant. Extenuating deprivation and war are grim handmaidens.

But the travails of Ernest Shackleton ended on a note of magnificent insight and encouragement. He wrote, "We have seen God and His splendors, heard the text that nature renders."

The quest to be the first to cross Antarctica ended in failure. But failure is not really failure when we see God shaping splendor from the clay of adversity.