

# Can You See Me *Now* ?”

Responsive Reading, “Trouble”; 2 Chronicles 20 <sup>1</sup>

It sometimes happens when I’m beside a bonfire that I remember Job’s lament that “*People are born for trouble as predictably as sparks fly upward from a fire*” (Job 5:7). Later, Job commented, “*How frail is humanity! How short is life, and how full of trouble! Like a flower, we blossom for a moment and then wither. Like the shadow of a passing cloud, we quickly disappear*” (Job 14:1-2). And Jeremiah cried out, “*Why was I ever born? My entire life has been filled with trouble*” (Jeremiah 20:18).

I don’t feel like that all the time, but sometimes I do. Perhaps you do, too. And it’s probable that at least a few of us here this morning are in that place right now. If that’s where you are, then this message is for you.

The apostle Paul knew his share of trouble. He told the Corinthians, “*Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. . . . I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers. . . . I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas*” (2 Corinthians 11:24-26).

But this same Paul also wrote, “*Does it mean [that God] no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? . . . I am convinced that nothing can separate us from his love. . . . That is why we never give up. . . . For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever*” (Romans 8:35, 38; 2 Corinthians 4:16, 18).

My friends, I suggest to you that when troubles overtake us, we need to remember that God allows trouble into our lives at least partly because of its soul-shaping potential both for this life and for the Life to come. Troubles teach us to trust in God.

Lake Okeechobee in southern Florida is one of the largest lakes in the United States. When a recent drought took the lake to its lowest recorded level, the receding water uncovered Native American artifacts that hadn’t ever been seen before. These materials hadn’t actually been under very much water, but no one had ever suspected their existence.

*Spiritual* droughts of one sort or another can have a similar effect, revealing strengths we hadn’t suspected and uncovering flaws we had not acknowledged, allowing God to shape our character in deeper ways.<sup>2</sup> As just one example of this, in the fall of 1991, Jerry Sittser was returning home to Spokane, Washington with his wife, Lynda, their four children, and his mother, when a drunk driver careened into them at high speed, killing Lynda, his mother, and their youngest daughter.

Some months later, Jerry had a dream in which the sun was setting and he was frantically chasing it toward the west, trying to catch it and bring it back. But the sun was soon gone, and he felt “a vast darkness closing in.” When Jerry told his sister, Diane, about the dream, she reminded him that the fastest way to reach the sun [or the Son] is not to go west but to head east, to “move fully into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise.”

This counterintuitive insight helped Jerry find the path toward healing: “I discovered in that moment that I had the power to choose the direction my life would take. . . . I decided from that point on to walk into the darkness rather try to outrun it . . . to let my experience of loss

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 29, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Kofman, “Beneath the Water: A Window to History,” ABC News, 9/13/07.

take me on a journey wherever it would lead, and to allow myself to be *transformed* by my suffering rather than to think I could somehow avoid it.”<sup>3</sup>

I haven’t ever experienced anything that awful, but in times of trouble it helps me to remember God’s promise through Isaiah: “*But now . . . listen to the LORD who created you. . . . Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior*” (Isaiah 43:1-3a).

Daniel’s friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, faced a literal fire as they stood before King Nebuchadnezzar near present-day Baghdad, steadfastly refusing to worship the idol he had set up, even if that refusal should cost them their lives: “*O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. **But even if he doesn’t**, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.*”

And so they were thrown into the furnace, into a fire so hot that it killed the soldiers who pushed them in. And suddenly, “*as he was watching, Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in amazement and exclaimed to his advisors, ‘Didn’t we tie up three men and throw them into the furnace?’*

“*Yes,’ they said, ‘we did indeed, Your Majesty.’*

“*Look!’ Nebuchadnezzar shouted, ‘I see four men, unbound, walking around in the fire. They aren’t even hurt by the flames! **And the fourth looks like a divine being!**’*” (Daniel 3:16-18, 24-25).

In December, 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton launched a daring expedition to cross the Antarctic on the ship, *Endurance*.<sup>4</sup> With only 100 miles left in the journey, Shackleton made the fateful decision to stop and wait for a break in the heavy ice in the Weddell Sea. Unfortunately, the temperature continued to drop, and the ship became locked in the ice.

As the ice began to crush the vessel, Shackleton gave the order to abandon ship, and the crew began a march in search of safety, carrying minimal supplies and dragging three lifeboats. Eventually reaching open water, they boarded the lifeboats and finally landed on the deserted Elephant Island.

Stranded on the island with no hope of rescue, Shackleton and four other crew members set off in one of the *lifeboats* to reach the island of South Georgia. Traveling 800 miles through the world’s most dangerous seas, they arrived at South Georgia only to discover that the whaling station was on the other side of the island. In order to rescue his crew in time, Shackleton and two of his men had to cross the treacherous cliffs of the island on foot. The island’s inhabitants considered such a journey impossible, but Shackleton and his two partners crossed the island in 36 hours, eventually saving their crew.

Afterward, Sir Ernest recorded these words about that crossing: “When I look back at those days I have no doubt that Providence guided us, not only across those snowfields, but across the storm-white sea that separated Elephant Island from our landing-place on South Georgia. I know that during that long, and racking march of thirty-six hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers of South Georgia **it seemed to me often that we were four, not three**. I said nothing to my companions on the point, but afterwards [one of them] said to me, ‘Boss, I

<sup>3</sup> Leighton Ford, *The Attentive Life* (Multnomah, 2008), p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> *Endurance*, White Mountain Films, 2003, directed by George Butler.

**had a curious feeling on the march that there was another person with us.**’ [My other partner] confessed to the same idea.”<sup>5</sup>

These stories of God’s provision in trouble give me goose-bumps; but by now, the more alert of you are wondering whatever happened to 2 Chronicles, where we’re supposed to be camping out this morning.<sup>6</sup> Well, take your Bibles and turn to 2 Chronicles 20, where a fascinating story is told about God’s faithfulness when we’re in Big Trouble.

Jehoshaphat began to rule the southern kingdom of Judah in 872 B.C. Like his father, Asa, Jehoshaphat was a good king who obeyed God’s commands and who frequently traveled over his realm, “*encouraging the people to return to the LORD, the God of their ancestors*” (2 Chronicles 19:4).

Now it happened that several neighboring kingdoms decided to declare war against Jehoshaphat. Messengers came and told the king, “*A vast army from Edom is marching against you from beyond the Dead Sea. They are already at Hazazon-Tamar*” (2 Chronicles 20:2).

Notice in verse 3 the first thing Jehoshaphat did in response to this reconnaissance report, which was not to call his army to battle stations: “*Jehoshaphat was alarmed by this news and sought the LORD for guidance. He also gave orders that everyone throughout Judah should observe a fast.*”

Now when troubles come into our lives—mine included—the first thing we usually do is to examine our own resources and compare them to the threat that has come against us. Though we may think of them later, praying, fasting, and calling out to God may not be at the top of our priority lists for crisis management—but they were at the top of Jehoshaphat’s list.

Jehoshaphat called the nation to prayer, and as he prayed, he said, “*O our God, won’t you stop them? We are powerless against this mighty army that is about to attack us. **We do not know what to do, but we are looking to you for help***” (20:12). And as the king concluded this prayer, the Spirit of the LORD came upon one of the men standing there, and he said, “*Listen, King Jehoshaphat! Listen, all you people of Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid! Don’t be discouraged by this mighty army, for **the battle is not yours, but God’s***” (20:15).

And so, the next morning, as Jehoshaphat marched to battle with his army, he stopped the march to say, “*Listen to me, all you people of Judah and Jerusalem! Believe in the LORD your God, and you will be able to stand firm. Believe in his prophets, and you will succeed*” (20:20).

<sup>5</sup> <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/shackleton/ernest/s52s/chapter10.html> See also the account of Aslan’s protection in C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* <https://gavinortlund.com/2008/06/05/favorite-narnia-moments-2-shasta-meets-aslan/>

<sup>6</sup> 1 & 2 Chronicles are arranged in four distinct sections:

1. 1 Chronicles 1-9 rapidly covers biblical history from Adam to King Saul, chiefly by use of genealogical lists.
2. 1 Chronicles 10-29 dwells at great length on the reign of King David, describing his public acts in great detail, but omitting almost everything from his private life, whether good or bad.
3. 2 Chronicles 1-9 describes the reign of King Solomon, again centering on public acts and ignoring the private shortcomings of which we learn in Kings.
4. 2 Chronicles 10-36 tells the story of the Kingdom of Judah from the division of the kingdom until the exile (c. 350 years; compare with a comparable history of the U.S. in similar space—how much would have to be left out!)
  - a. The most unusual thing about the story is that it does not mention the northern kingdom of Israel at all except where it is necessary to tell the story of Judah.
  - b. Of course, only the kings of Judah were in the line of the House of David and the promised Messiah.

After this, Jehoshaphat called out the singers—sort of like the Marine Band, I guess—and had them march in front of the army praising God for His holy splendor.

**And at the moment the army began to sing** and give praise to God, the LORD caused the attacking armies to begin fighting among themselves, such that they actually destroyed each other and never engaged Jehoshaphat’s army at all! More than this, the self-destructing armies left behind so much plunder that it took Jehoshaphat’s army three days to collect it all! (20:22-25).

Some years later, a similar thing happened when the king of Aram was planning to attack the northern kingdom of Israel. Every time an attack was planned, the LORD revealed to the prophet Elisha what was about to happen, and Israel disrupted the attack. After this had happened several times, the king of Aram accused his leaders of harboring a spy, but they said, “*It’s not us, my lord. Elisha, the prophet in Israel, tells the king of Israel even the words you speak in the privacy of your bedroom!*” (2 Kings 6:12).

After learning this, the Aramean army surrounded Elisha’s house under cover of darkness, and when Elisha’s servant got up the next morning he saw troops, horses, and chariots everywhere! “*Ah, my lord, what will we do now?*” he cried out to Elisha.

“*Don’t be afraid!*” Elisha told him. “*For there are more on our side than on theirs!*” Then Elisha prayed, “*O LORD, open his eyes and let him see!*” The LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and when he looked up, **he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire**” (2 Kings 6:15-17).

Sometimes, when you and I face trouble, as the people in these stories did, and when we cry out to God for help as they did, we experience a similar deliverance. But did you notice that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said, “Our God will rescue us, **but even if he doesn’t**, we will never serve your gods or worship your statue”?

Some of us in this room can tell wonderful stories of God’s deliverance . . . but some of us can also tell stories of when, for reasons known only to God, such deliverance did not come. It was so even with our Lord Jesus as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “*My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. . . . but **if this cup cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done***” (Matthew 26:39, 42).

I’m even more impressed by Jesus’ statement in John 12:27-28: “*Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. **Father, glorify your name!***”

What you and I must always keep in mind is that our lives on earth are not the Real Story. What happens here, both of joy and sorrow, is real enough, of course; but our lives here are really a proving ground for the Life that is to come. Our purpose in this life is that we allow God to so shape our character here that we are willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him, and that we bring as many others with us as we can.

It’s been said that our lives are like stained glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out; but in the Darkness, their beauty can be seen only if there is a Light within.<sup>7</sup> And so it is that God may allow us who follow Him to experience the Darkness so that His Light may shine more brightly out of our lives into a hurting world.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Unknown, *Leadership*, vol. 1, no. 2.

<sup>8</sup> See 2 Corinthians 4:7 – “*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*” It’s through the broken places in the “jars” that the Light gets out.

It was for this reason that Paul wrote, “*I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe*” (Ephesians 1:17-19). It was the answer to such a prayer as this that caused Job to exclaim after all his horrible, but faithful, suffering, “*I had only heard about you before, but **now I have seen you with my own eyes***” (Job 42:5).

You and I have not yet seen God. We are still in the situation Peter described when he wrote, “*If your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. **You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and even now you are happy with a glorious, inexpressible joy. Your reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls***” (1 Peter 1:7-9).

When God allows troubles to touch our lives, God also offers promises that anchor our souls in stormy seas. When Darkness overtakes our lives and our hearts can no longer sense God’s Presence, one of the most important of these soul anchors is the knowledge that, no matter what trouble we face, the Cross of Jesus stands as God’s eternal answer to the question of whether or not we are loved, and His Resurrection is witness that we will be victorious in the End.

As the old hymn puts it, “*Though the cause of evil prosper, yet the Truth alone is strong. Though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be Wrong. Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, standeth God, within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.*”<sup>9</sup>

My friends, so long as our journey continues here in the Shadowlands, we follow God by faith, and not by sight (Hebrews 11:1). When our journey is through Darkness, we move forward by His power and under His mercy, not “*somehow,*” but TRIUMPHANTLY, journeying toward the fulfillment of this promise: “*Dear friends, we are already God’s children, [and] he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for **we will see him as he really is***” (1 John 3:2).

Many times in this life, we see God only dimly, if at all.<sup>10</sup> But there will come a day, my friends, when God will smile and say, “**I have been with you always, whether you knew it or not. Can you see me NOW?**”

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<sup>9</sup> James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Man and Nation”

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

# Trouble

Leader: *People are born for trouble as predictably as sparks fly upward from a fire (Job 5:7).*

**People:** ***The LORD is good, a strong refuge when trouble comes. He is close to those who trust in him (Nahum 1:7).***

Leader: *How frail is humanity! How short is life, and how full of trouble! Like a flower, we blossom for a moment and then wither. Like the shadow of a passing cloud, we quickly disappear (Job 14:1-2).*

**People:** ***The LORD is a shelter for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. Those who know your name trust in you, for you O LORD, have never abandoned anyone who searches for you (Psalm 9:9-10).***

Leader: *Why was I ever born? My entire life has been filled with trouble, sorrow, and shame (Jeremiah 20:18).*

**People:** ***God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So we will not fear, even if earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea (Psalm 46:1-2).***

Leader: *Seventy years are given to us! Some may even reach eighty. But even the best of these years are filled with pain and trouble; soon they disappear, and we are gone (Psalm 90:10-11).*

**People:** ***Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare of the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I am trusting him (Psalm 91:1-2).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

**People:** **Thanks be to God!**