

Matthew 14:22-36

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- [0 : 00] Life can be tough, and that's not some great insight on my part. You know that, some of you know it, in a much more immediate way than perhaps others of us.
- The circumstances of your life have made that truth a very real and evident one. Perhaps even today, there are circumstances that you're confronting, that you're wrestling with, that are very difficult.
- And a question that is posed, and often posed, and posed by Christians is the question, where is God in the midst of trials?
- Where is God when life is tough? And as I say, that's a question that has been often posed. Even by faithful believers, it's not wrong to pose the question.
- We can just think of those who have posed the question. The psalmist poses that question very directly in Psalm 10 and in verse 1.
- [1 : 12] We can just read that one verse of Psalm 10 and see how the psalmist poses the very question that I'm talking about or making reference to.
- There, Psalm 10, the very first verse. Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
- Well, it's a question that he's posing. But it's clear that the reason he poses the question is that the perception of the psalmist is that it is so.
- And he's asking why. We're not saying that he's right in thinking that this is the case, but he asks the question. He poses the question in a very honest and frank way.
- Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? Where is God, is really the question that he's asking. Well, what do we make of the psalmist's concern?
- [2 : 15] Verbalized in these questions. Does God stand far off? Does he hide himself in times of trouble? And times of trouble, there are a plenty.
- You know, one expression we sometimes use is, I'm not in a good place. Or we sometimes say it of others. You know, he's not in a good place.
- And that's true. That can be your experience. It's perhaps my experience. Just so that this isn't a distraction for you as I continue preaching.
- I've just noticed that we didn't sing the third praise item. But I'm just going to carry on preaching. But some of you are thinking, we've still got to sing. We still haven't sung something. So that you can just realize that I just forgot.
- Let's just move on. Okay? So sorry, guys. But I'll part that one and continue with the sermon. So yes, that's our experience.
- [3 : 14] That can often be our experience. I'm not in a good place. Or we might say it of others. They're struggling in some way or other. And that's the way we describe it. You know, he or she or they or that family.

They're not in a good place. Now, in the passage that we've read in Matthew chapter 14, we read or we note how the disciples are experiencing, to use the language of the psalmist, a time of trouble.

They are not in a good place. In fact, they're stranded in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. We read the passage there in Matthew chapter 14, and we see how they're there in the middle of the lake, and a storm is raging all around them.

Now, that's not a good place to be. They're a long way from land. And in Matthew's account, this incident is recorded by three of the evangelists.

And in Matthew's account, it simply states, or the manner in which it's translated there in verse 24, is that the boat was already a considerable distance from the land.

[4 : 28] And then if you notice, there's a little footnote at the bottom of the page, and there you have the actual Greek measurement that is being translated in that way.

Many stadia. And so that's a rather vague reference, but in John's account, there is a lot more precision. In John chapter 6 and verse 19, what John says is that the boat and the disciples on the boat were 20 to 25 stadia from land.

Now, when you do the maths of what that looks like in measurements that we're familiar with, that would be about three miles. So they're three miles from the shore. And the Sea of Galilee, at its greatest width, is about seven miles.

So if they're crossing from west to east, if they're three miles in, that is pretty much in the middle of the lake. We don't know exactly where the journey began and the route that they took, but it seems reasonable to say that what John is saying is that they were bang smack in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, and there is this storm raging all around them.

So they're not in a good place. This is a time of trouble for them. And then we notice just other element about that reality that they're experiencing, as it's described for us in the passage.

[6 : 00] Or I think a reasonable implication we can draw, given the hours that have passed, is that they would be weary. They're tired. They're exhausted. They've been struggling with the storm for many hours.

And though they were familiar with the lake, and they weren't novices by any means, nonetheless, all of that experience would have exhausted them. They've been battling with the storm and with seemingly little result.

And I think we can relate to how tough places are all the tougher when we're weary. It's one thing to confront a trial, a difficulty when we feel strong, and when we are strong.

But when we're weary, when we're tired, even physically tired and exhausted, it's so much more difficult to handle, to cope with at times of trouble.

Now, I don't suppose that many of us are likely to be stranded in the middle of a lake. But there are plenty of bad or tough places that we can find ourselves in.

[7 : 07] For some, it might be a relationship that we're struggling with, or perhaps a relationship that is broken, and we're dealing with the consequences of that broken relationship.

For some, it might be a question of physical health or mental health, be it of ourselves, or of somebody we love, or somebody that we care for.

Financial difficulties can also be a real challenge and a real trial that some have to confront. In life, there are times when we have to deal with a season, a time of despondency, perhaps, of doubt, of depression.

These are experiences that are familiar to us. Maybe not all of them, but one or other of them, or others that I haven't made specific reference to.

And in all of these tough places or bad places, and in all of these times of trouble, the question can arise, where is God?

[8 : 11] And so often, we are weary, and the very weariness magnifies the scale of the severity of our tough or bad place.

Can you relate to that, to the experience of being in a difficult, in a tough place, in a bad place?

Can you relate to that? And can you relate to that question being formulated in your mind, even if you don't verbalize it? Where is God?

The question that I want to pose as we think about this passage that we've read, and how it can perhaps help us in this matter, I want to pose this question. Where was Jesus when his disciples were in a bad place?

You know, we've identified them. In this case, it's a geographic location. In the middle of the lake, the storm is raging, and the question is, where is Jesus? Where is Jesus when his disciples are in this bad place?

[9 : 16] And as we think about that, and as we try and find answers to that question, I think as we do, we can draw out answers for ourselves to the question, where is God when we are in a bad place?

Where is Jesus when we are in a tough place, or we are going through a time of trouble? Does he stand far off?

Is he distant? Is he absent? Or is he there with us and for us? What I want you to do is, I want you to notice five verbs that we can, or that describe Jesus' involvement in this drama, recorded in the passage that we've read.

And each of these verbs highlights a manner in which Jesus is very much involved and present in the midst of the storm.

So I'll mention what these five verbs are. They're not necessarily verbs that we find in the passage, but they're certainly verbs that describe Jesus' involvement in the incident.

[10 : 25] So the first one is sends. Jesus sends. Then we're going to notice that Jesus prays. Then we're going to notice how Jesus goes. Then Jesus comforts.

And then finally Jesus takes hold. And in all of these different ways, we'll see how he is very much present in this place of trouble, in this storm that his disciples are experiencing.

So first of all, Jesus sends. Verse 22. Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side while he dismissed the crowd.

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat. Jesus sends the disciples into the storm.

You know, we're going to get to the point where Jesus rescues them from the storm. And that's something that we can relate to and we can say, yeah, that's right. Jesus rescues from the storm. But this is an intriguing one in terms of how Jesus relates to this situation.

[11 : 32] Jesus sends them into the storm. He doesn't just appear when they're in trouble and rescues them. You know, who wouldn't want a savior who does that? But rather intriguingly and maybe even quite difficult for us to get our heads round, what we find here is that Jesus is the one who sends them into the storm.

The language here is really quite strong. It's the language of compulsion. Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat. You know, he's exercising his authority over them and he's practically obliging them to get into the boat and to launch out into the lake.

Fully aware that what awaits them is this raging storm. Now, we can ask the question or we can speculate as to why he did this.

One possibility that doesn't really come out in Matthew's account, but it does come out a little bit more in John's account, is that having fed the 5,000, which is the immediately preceding event that is described, not only by Matthew but also by John, in John's account we're told how the crowd, so impressed by this miracle, were intent on making Jesus king.

They thought, this is the man who we want to govern over us. And so this was their desire. And Jesus, of course, as he always did, was always backing away from those expectations that many of the people had.

[13 : 11] And perhaps here, conscious that maybe his disciples might be quite taken with this idea of him exercising authority over the people and the privileged places they might enjoy in that regime.

He sees fit to send them off into the lake, that they wouldn't join in this unwelcome clamor a clamor for him to become some kind of worldly king or authority.

So that's possibly why there's this urgency to get them into the boat and into the lake. But it doesn't really matter for us to be sure about why he does it. The point is, that's what he does.

He is the one who is responsible for sending them, not only into the lake, but into the storm, whatever the reason might be. And not only does he send them into the storm, but he doesn't even accompany them.

You know, it'd be one thing to say, right, let's go into the storm. And I'll be there with you. And he says, no, you go into the storm. You go into the lake. I'm off into the mountain to pray. So he sends them alone into the lake and into the storm.

[14 : 21] To make it even more difficult to understand, he doesn't give them any clear directions as to what the reason for this is, or even where their destination is.

He's saying, right, just head across the lake. And, you know, don't ask questions. Just do what I'm telling you to do. And I wonder if the disciples are somewhat puzzled by this behavior on the part of Jesus.

It is quite perplexing. And yet at the same time, it's very reassuring. Because it's true also for us. It is the Lord who orders our circumstances and, yes, even directs our steps into the storm, into the time of trouble, into that difficult, tough place.

And so when we're in that place, we don't need to imagine that somehow this is taking God by surprise, that somehow God is going to have to scratch his head and say, well, how can I help them? Well, look at where they are. No, he's the one who's placed us there.

He's the one who has ordered our circumstances to be there. Now, we may be very unsure as to why he would do that, but we can be sure that his purposes are good and gracious.

[15 : 35] And there is comfort in knowing that it is God who is ordering the circumstances of our lives, even when, and especially when, they are difficult and painful and confusing.

We don't understand, but he does. So Jesus sent them into the storm. That's the first thing I wanted you just to notice. But also, we notice that Jesus prays for them in the storm.

Verse 23, after he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Now, we're not told what he prayed about.

He is speaking with his father. And no doubt there was much that he said to his father as he enjoyed sweet communion with him. But it seems reasonable.

It seems almost inevitable that as he prayed, for what it would appear would have been several hours, one of the things that he would have been praying about and for would have been his disciples.

[16 : 41] As they head into the storm and as they struggle with the storm, he was on the mountain praying for them. The timings that were given when it speaks there of how in verse 25 it says, during the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went out to them.

Now, the fourth watch of the night would have been from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. And now, we presume, given what had happened before, they'd launched out into the lake, perhaps late evening.

So, at the very least, we're talking about a few hours. And it would seem reasonable to assume that all of that time Jesus had dedicated, once he got to whatever it was he was going to pray, to pray, and as he did.

Among other things, no doubt, he was praying for his disciples. Now, we might say, well, yes, that's fine. That happened then. And, you know, good for them, good for the disciples, that they were supported in that way, Jesus praying for them.

But does that mean that he does the same for us? And the answer is that he does. Praying for his people is part of Jesus' continuing ministry on our behalf.

[17 : 53] You know, we sometimes speak of, and there is a right sense of this, we speak about the finished work of Jesus. And, of course, in one regard, that's true. Part of his work of redemption is a finished work.

But there is a continuing ministry of Jesus on behalf of his people. And central to that ministry is his ministry as our great high priest, as he intercedes for us.

Paul, in Romans chapter 8, in verse 34, speaks of that and makes very explicit how this is something that Jesus is doing for us in the here and now.

In verse 34 of chapter 8, we read, who is he that condemns Christ Jesus, who died more than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us in the present tense.

That is what Jesus does for his people now. He prayed for his disciples there in the lake facing the storm, and he prays for us, his people, his disciples, in whatever storm we are in or in whatever storm you are in.

[18 : 58] Be assured of that. In the middle of the trial, in the middle of the confusion, in the middle of the pain, Jesus is interceding for you at the right hand of God. So Jesus sent them into the storm.

Jesus prayed for them in the storm. But then also, Jesus goes out to them in the storm. Verse 25, during the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

Now, he was both, as far as we know, both unsought and uninvited. We're certainly given no indication that the disciples were calling out for him. They probably would have thought it would have been a fruitless thing to do.

He wasn't within earshot. But though unsought, though uninvited in a sense, he heads out to them. Now, to do that, in order to go and to find them in the middle of the lake, there's a couple of obvious things that must have been true.

He must have known where they were, and he must have had the power to get to where they were. Now, both of these things would be things that would have been quite beyond any normal human being.

[20 : 10] There might have been somebody who said, well, I'd like to help these friends of mine who are in the middle of the lake. I know they're there somewhere, and there's this storm raging, and I'd like to help them. But there would have been no way of doing so.

If you don't know where they are, if you've got no way of getting there, how can you possibly help them? You know, we think of this very tragic case that's been in the news of this footballer who was just being signed by Cardiff, and he was heading back to France where he'd been playing to just say goodbye to his teammates, and then this private jet was going to take him to Cardiff.

And, of course, the plane has been lost, and, you know, they've been searching, and the search has been abandoned. Why? Well, there's plenty of people wanting to help. You know, countless people want to help, but they don't know where he is, and they can't get to him.

But in the case of Jesus, he knows where they are, and he's able to get to them, and that is what he does. He has this, he enjoys this divine, supernatural power of knowing where they are and of being able to approach them where they are.

Of course, that's true for us as well. Wherever you are, not necessarily in terms of geographic location, but wherever you are in your life, Jesus knows where you are, but not only does he know where you are, he is able to reach you where you are.

[21 : 31] He is able. He can walk on water. He can get to that place where you are. You are never inaccessible to Jesus.

You know, I wonder if the disciples, when they were facing the storm, I wonder if some of them thought, well, if only Jesus could be here to help us, and then I thought, well, there's no possibility, you know, it's just not possible.

We're inaccessible to him, but of course, they weren't inaccessible to him, and we are not, you are not inaccessible to Jesus. So Jesus sent them into the storm.

He prayed for them in the storm. He went out to them in the storm. Two more things to say. Jesus comforted them in the storm. Verse 27. But Jesus immediately said to them, take courage.

It is I. Don't be afraid. Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid. Now, one detail that it's worth stressing is that the comfort that Jesus provides is in the storm.

[22 : 34] Deliverance from the storm follows. There is deliverance from the storm. The storm is quieted, but the comfort that he gives is while the storm is still raging. I think that's the usual pattern of God's comfort for his people.

It is not ordinarily provided by removing the trial or the pain or the difficulty, but providing comfort in the midst of it. And of course, it is within God's prerogative and certainly within his power to remove as he sees fit, and sometimes he does see fit, but sometimes he doesn't.

But in the midst of the trial, he brings the comfort and the strength and the grace that we need. But what at heart is the comfort that he supplies?

Well, it's himself. He himself is the comfort. Notice what he says there in verse 27. He says, take courage, but then I think at the heart of what he says is what follows. It is I.

It is I. And that's really all they need to know. You know, they thought it was a ghost, and so they need to be assured who it is. And he says, it's me. It's me. That's really what he's saying. It's me. And that provides comfort enough.

[23 : 46] Now, much is made, I think rightly so, of this expression. It is I, or I am, and how there is an echo of the divine name revealed to Moses in Exodus, or the explanation of it revealed to Moses in Exodus.

I am that I am. And so the occasions when Jesus declares, as he does here, ego I me, I am. I think it's right to understand there to be a kind of divine suggestion, at least, as to his identity.

But even if we take it at the most simplest level, it's me. That is sufficient to bring comfort to the disciples. And what greater comfort for us is God before us who can be against us.

It's not so much the resources that he can provide, though he can, of course, but his own presence with us and for us that is the greatest comfort. Jesus comforted them in the storm.

But then also, one further thing that we can say about Jesus is that Jesus takes hold of and rescues them from the storm. Verse 31, Jesus, or rather immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

[24 : 58] Now here we're talking about Peter, of course, we're kind of jumping all that's said about Jesus inviting Peter, urging Peter to walk on water himself and all that happens and jumping to the rescue, as it were.

Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. You have little faith, he said. Why did you doubt? You know, Peter here, in a sense, is representing all the other disciples, indeed all disciples, as the disciple, like we all do, the disciple who takes his eyes off Jesus.

You know, we see the wind and we see the waves, we see the problems, we see the insurmountables, we see the opposition, we see the difficulties and we're consumed by it all and we take our eyes off Jesus and then the consequences are there to see, we begin to sink.

But even when we do that, even when we're foolish enough to take our eyes off Jesus, even when we're foolish in the sense of allowing all the circumstances to overwhelm us, Jesus doesn't say, well, that's your problem.

He takes out or he reaches out and takes a firm grip on his disciple and rescues him from the waves and from the storm.

[26 : 20] So Jesus concludes his participation, if you wish, in this very powerful way, taking hold of Peter and rescuing not only Peter but all the other disciples also as the wind dies down and they're able to proceed in safety to the shore.

So in all of these ways, we see Jesus in the midst of the troubles that the disciples are in. Where is God? Where is Jesus in the time of trouble?

Well, I think this story, true story of events that actually happened teaches us a great deal about where God is and how God is involved in our lives in the midst of trial and trouble and difficulty.

And maybe just to draw things to a close and to conclude, what are we to make? How are we to respond to the one who does all these things, to the one who sends his disciples into the storm for purposes that we might never fully come to understand?

How are we to respond to the one who prays for us in the midst of the storm, who reaches out to us in the storm and comforts us, takes hold of us and rescues us?

[27 : 39] How do we respond to such a God, to such a Savior? Well, in the same manner that the disciples did. In verse 33, we read, Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, Truly, you are the Son of God.

The word here that is employed to describe the disciples as worshipping him is a word that is used of the worship of God. This isn't simply some respectful reverence to one who has done them a great favor, who has performed some great wonder, but this is speaking of the worship of God Almighty being rendered, being offered to Jesus.

Indeed, we're also given an insight into their evolving understanding as to the identity of the one they are worshipping. Truly, you are the Son of God.

No doubt, the disciples still didn't have a full grasp of the implications even of the language that they're using. but they were given, they were granted by the Spirit of God sufficient insight to be able to state this truth concerning God and indeed to worship him using this language, identify him as the Son of God.

We who look back on these events and who have the privilege of a completed canon, we have a greater understanding of who Jesus is, a greater understanding of the significance of this title that they employ to worship him, the Son of God, and so greater reason to bow down and worship him.

[29 : 22] So, to conclude, what I would urge you and what I would encourage you is to know the presence and the purposes and the protection of God in your troubles, in your trials, whatever they might be, and as you do, so you might, and we might all with the disciples bow down and worship him.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, we thank you for your Son, we thank you for all that we discover about Jesus in the record of this event that we've been given some thought to this evening.

we do thank you that though for us it can be a mysterious and maybe even a perplexing truth, but nonetheless, we thank you for the comfort that it brings to know that you are in control and that you order our circumstances even in the sense of placing us in times of trial and trouble and difficulty and pain and that you have gracious and good purposes in doing so.

Help us when we can't see those purposes to trust that our trust in you would be such that even and perhaps especially when we don't understand we know what it is to be assured that you know best and all that you do is for our good.

We thank you that you are the one who is ever concerned for us. We thank you for Jesus who is our great high priest. We thank you that he is interceding for us in every circumstance of life.

[30 : 58] We thank you for the comfort that you provide to us and very especially with your very presence with us and we thank you that you are the God who grabs hold of us when we stumble and who rescues us from the storm and in the midst of the storm.

Help us as we acknowledge these things with gratitude to bow down and worship you and we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.