

GOD IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

In Times Of Zero Visibility

James 1:2-8

Created by *Dale Ohmart*

Big Idea: *Each of us faces times when our circumstances prevent us from seeing "the glory of God."*

Let's begin this morning with a quick vision check. Take a look at this next slide, and let's see what you can see.

G
O D
I S C
L O S E
R T H A N
Y O U T H I
N K

Do you see what it really says. That's right...GOD IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK. This is the title of the theme we will be talking about for the next few weeks. I have to confess that I borrowed the title from a book by John Ortberg. And I love the imagery of his book cover, which is designed to resemble an eye chart. With it, he and his publishers have captured the real essence of our daily struggle when it comes to the sense of God's presence in our lives. All too often, it feels and looks like this...

I S C
L O S E
R T H A N
Y O U T H I
N K

You know what I mean? We lose sight of God and His purpose under the pressure and pace of our circumstances. But it isn't really true. He hasn't withdrawn. He's still there. Consider these verses of promise...

Psalm 31

⁷ I am overcome with joy because of your unfailing love, for you have seen my troubles, and you care about the anguish of my soul.

⁹ Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am in distress. My sight is blurred because of my tears. My body and soul are withering away.

¹⁴ But I am trusting you, O LORD, saying, "You are my God!"

²² In sudden fear I had cried out, "I have been cut off from the LORD!" But you heard my cry for mercy and answered my call for help.

²⁴ So be strong and take courage, all you who put your hope in the LORD! (NLT)¹

You probably recognize these five words... "Houston, we have a problem."

Those well-known words of astronaut Jim Lovell introduced what may be the most memorable event in the history of the American space program. In the script for the movie *Apollo 13*, Tom Hanks narrates that this flight was called a "successful failure." A **failure** because it did not fulfill the initial purpose of the flight. **Successful** because they were able to bring the crew home safely.

I suppose to some extent, the best we all can hope for at the end of our lives is to be "successful failures." A week doesn't go by when we don't recognize the fact that we have indeed all failed. The Bible's word for that is SIN. In every life, there comes a moment when it becomes necessary to say, "We have a problem." Those words are hard to say. But say them we must if we are going to be honest and if we are going to be able to take the first step in our relationship with God. That's the only hope we have to transform our **failure** into a **success**.

This series isn't about that so much as it is about the problems that aren't our fault. We all have plenty of those problems in our lives, too, don't we.

I was talking with my brother this past week, and he brought me up to date on the most recent events in the life of one of his friends, a man we have both known since college days. In fact, this man has actually visited here at LifeSpring before. Well, it seems that one day a couple of weeks ago, while he was working out at the YMCA in the town where he lives, his automobile was stolen along with several very valuable possessions. They recovered the vehicle a few days ago. I guess someone was living in it, and they found drugs...but he did get it back. So, on Thursday, he was at the Salvation Army store...I don't know how long he was in there, but when it was time to leave he discovered that his pickup had been broken into, valuables had been taken again, and the thieves had even stolen the cap off the bed.

I have friends who have lost their jobs. I have friends who are facing catastrophic, life-threatening illness. I have friends who are hurting because of problems in their relationships.

DIFFICULTY IS PART OF EVERYBODY'S LIFE

¹ Scriptures marked "(NLT)" are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation copyright © 1996 by [Tyndale Charitable Trust](#).
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Sometimes, a person will experience a season of life where it doesn't seem that way. Athletes talk about getting "in a zone." In those times, a player can do no wrong. Every decision is the right one. It is a time of unbridled success.

Years ago, I met a man who had one of those seasons. He was the owner of a large and prosperous ranch. His wealth put him at the top of everybody's list of the rich and famous. And he was one of those rare individuals who managed to live in the public eye without a hint of scandal. There were no skeletons in his closet...his wife didn't need to hire a private detective to find out where he spent his time...he didn't have to worry about any of his children writing a "tell all" book. In fact, all of his relationships were in order. He realized that in the end, the measure of a life is not the balance in a bank account or the title under his name on the door.

And then, one day, the unthinkable happened. In a devastating cascade of catastrophe, he lost everything. One day, his ranch was ransacked...his herds were stolen and his ranch hands were massacred. His children were killed by a tornado that struck the house where they were all having dinner together. A couple of days later, his body was covered by a mysterious rash that caused painful blisters.

Put yourself in that man's place. How would you feel about your circumstances? Let me tell you how he felt. In fact, I can show you exactly what he said...

Job 3

³"Cursed be the day of my birth, and cursed be the night when I was conceived....

¹¹"Why didn't I die at birth as I came from the womb? ¹²Why did my mother let me live? Why did she nurse me at her breasts? ¹³For if I had died at birth, I would be at peace now, asleep and at rest." (NLT)

The impact of difficulty on a person's life is not tracked on any scoreboard. Still, I think most people are a little breathless when they read through the list of tragedies that Job had to endure. They look at the struggles they have and feel humbled.

But put that aside, and be honest. Haven't there been times when you've either said or felt exactly what Job said? Job's experience is the experience of the human race. He puts words to cosmic questions that have very personal implications. Spiros Zodhiates summarizes those questions beautifully in a study Bible I use to prepare my messages.

How could such a good God make such an evil world? Why should we do good? What reward is there for living right? Why do some righteous people suffer and why does sin sometimes go unpunished? How does this square with the concept of a fair, holy, loving God? Does God really care for and protect His people who revere Him? Are adversity and affliction a sign that a sufferer is wicked? If God is good, why does He allow the suffering of the innocent?²

I can't tell you how many people I've talked to who have asked me some version of those questions. Sometimes it is a cop out. But other times the person doing the asking is very genuine.

DIFFICULTY HIDES GOD FROM US

² Spiros Zodhiates, ed. *The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*. Copyright © 1984 and 1990 by AMG International, Inc. In the introduction of "The Book of JOB."

Last week, we sang a hymn that expresses a thought that resonates down to the tips of my toes. *Holy, Holy, Holy, though the darkness hides Thee; though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see.* I sing those words from the deepest part of my soul. I haven't suffered the way Job did, but I know about times when it feels like God has disappeared behind a granite sky that bounces my prayers right back into my face. Job puts words to those moments in life...

Job 3

²³Why is life given to those with no future, those destined by God to live in distress? ²⁴I cannot eat for sighing; my groans pour out like water. ²⁵What I always feared has happened to me. What I dreaded has come to be. ²⁶I have no peace, no quietness. I have no rest; instead, only trouble comes." (NLT)

Those are the words of a man who has lost sight of his God. He has fallen into despair. Circumstances have stolen his hope.

In *Apollo 13*, there is a scene where Tom Hanks, playing the role of Commander Jim Lovell, shares an experience in an interview about a near crisis he had while flying in a combat situation over the Pacific Ocean. It was night, and he was having some problems with the homing system of his plane, which was supposed to guide him back to the aircraft carrier. He was about out of fuel, flying between a sandwich of black sky above and black sea below. Zero visibility. Suddenly, the lights in his cockpit burned out. Now, he couldn't see a thing. What was he going to do? Fortunately, he was able to stay calm long enough for his eyes to adjust. As he looked down, he suddenly saw a phosphorescent wave in the sea below. He realized it was the algae being stirred up in the wake of a giant ship. It was catching and reflecting the light from the moon. It was like a gigantic arrow pointing him toward home. The only way he was able to see it was when the lights burned out in his cabin.

Are you in the middle of a zero visibility situation in your life? Here is a lifeline for you to hang onto...

DIFFICULTY IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE GOD

Sometimes, the Bible asks us to do some things that sound kind of crazy. For instance, look at what these verses say...

James 1:2-8

²Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides.

Oh, yeah. Every time the car breaks down is a gift from God. When I suddenly get a bill that is bigger than the money I have available, that's a blessing. When one of the kids gets sick at school, we ought to have a party. Isn't that how you feel?

Well, maybe not. At first, we can't see anything. But then, as our eyes adjust, we begin to develop the ability to see the phosphorescent wake in the sea below. Sometimes it takes awhile to get to that point. But it is there. James goes on to explain that the celebration isn't about the problem. It's all about the potential result every difficulty can have in our lives.

³You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. ⁴So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way. ⁵If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be

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condescended to when you ask for it. ⁶Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who "worry their prayers" are like wind-whipped waves. ⁷Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, ⁸adrift at sea, keeping all your options open. (MSG)³

If I understand the Bible correctly, we grow when our relationship with God is tested by difficulties. In fact, the implication seems to be that we don't grow *without* those difficulties. Over the next few weeks, we'll explore six different challenges that threaten our ability to see God's involvement in our lives. And I hope that in the process, we'll see the great opportunity we have to experience Him in a greater way than ever before. Because even when we can't see Him, God is closer than we think.

He's closer than we think when we are facing troubles in our lives.

He's closer than we think when routine responsibilities cause us to feel insignificant and invisible.

He's closer than we think when we have to choose between the people He has put in our lives and the dreams we have for the future.

He's closer than we think when we give...and give...and give...to the point where we think we have nothing left to give.

He's closer than we think when we have to choose between the right way and the popular way.

He's closer than we think when we pass through times that involve loss and death.

In those times, God invites us to ask for wisdom and expect...I repeat, **expect**...that He will give us the direction we need. That doesn't mean He's going to write anything on the walls or in the sky. It is definitely a matter of faith. But He promises to be there for us.

When he was a young man, William Frey volunteered to read for a blind student to help as he studied for a degree. One day, Frey got up the courage to ask the student, named John, how he lost his sight. John explained that it happened during a chemical explosion when he was thirteen. Frey asked, "How did it make you feel?"

"Life was over," John said. "I felt helpless. I hated God. For the first six months I did nothing at all. I would eat all my meals alone in my room. Then, one day, my father came in and said, 'John, winter's coming and the storm windows need to be put up. That's your job. I want those windows to be hung before I get back this evening.' And he turned, walked out and slammed the door.

"I was so angry. I thought, *Who does he think I am? I'm blind!* I was so angry that I decided to do it. I felt my way to the garage, found the windows, located the necessary tools, found the ladder, all the while muttering under my breath, 'I'll show them. I'll fall, then they'll have a blind and paralyzed son!'"

John continued, "I got the windows up. I found out later that never at any moment was my father more than four or five feet away from my side."⁴

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⁴ William Frey, "When Words Come To an End," Message delivered at Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama (July 2003); submitted by Van Morris, Mt. Washington, Kentucky. Copied from www.PreachingToday.com. Copyright © 2005 PreachingToday.com and Christianity Today, International.

I will be with you always. That's the promise. Whether we see Him or not, He is there. Whether we feel Him or not, He is there. Have you fully put your trust in Him yet?