

THE TIME OF TROUBLE¹

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You know about things that go bump in the night. They make your stomach feel uptight. Scritch—Scratch—Patter—Bump! There it is was again. And my heart was going Thump! Thump! Thump!

We had just turned in to bed for the night under our secure, warm, comfortable covers in our locked up house in the safest place the bedroom. And there it was again, Bumpity, bumpity, scratch! A mouse, I wondered. How could one mouse make so many scary sounds. She poked her head out from under the covers and listened. It must be an awfully large mouse, or even a *rat!*

She had been sitting in her easy chair in the family room when she saw it with its long whiskers and sharp teeth. She shrieked with terror!

What makes bad news bad is the presence of fear. Fear is the most powerful negative emotion known to man and animals. From our earliest conscious moment, this nameless dread of the unknown oppresses us. Animals are constantly on guard against their natural enemies. All through life, even to our dying moments, we live constantly on the threshold of fear. Happy and secure one moment, we can be in terror the next

Fear with accompanying anxiety is the basis of human existence in all ages. Fear too deep for us to understand can make us sick, gnawing at the vitals

¹ Daniel 12:1. “The Lord in Zion Reigneth,” “O Safe to the Rock.”

of the soul until even one’s physical organs weaken and become susceptible to disease. Years may go by before we can see or feel the disease, but at last the weakened organs break down, and doctors must go to work to try to repair the damage that fear has caused.

You don’t have to be a devout Bible reader to see that a time of horrendous trouble faces this planet. The combination of fictional horror movies and real life terrorism makes a devastating assault on today’s human mind.

But even the Bible-reading believer has a problem with a special brand of terror: fear of the last-day time of trouble. While it’s nice to know that Jesus is coming soon, here stands this final obstacle course through hell itself before He comes. Why is it that such good news as the second coming has to be accompanied by such bad news as the time of trouble?

Daniel says, “There shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time” (Dan. 12:1). Will it be worse than World War II? Psalm 91, while trying to comfort us, tells us of “the terror by night, . . . the pestilence that walketh in darkness” and “the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand” (Ps. 91:5-7).

And Jesus adds to our dread of that time: “Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one

another” (Matt. 24:9, 10). Is it any wonder that some people who say they believe in Christ’s second coming add rather ruefully, “I hope He doesn’t come in *my* day, if it has to be all that bad.”

Could there be something about the time of trouble that we haven’t yet understood? The news may be much better than we have thought.

Consider the story of Delia Owens. It was bad enough for Daniel, the brave prophet, to be thrown into a den of lions. That was his “time of trouble,” an ordeal as frightening to him as our facing the time of trouble is to us. Can you imagine a woman facing the terror of spending a lonely African night out in the open with wild lions?

If you had asked Delia Owens when she was a girl how she would like to spend the night in Africa on the ground in a sleeping bag with wild lions milling all around her, she would probably have shrieked in horror at the prospect.

But here she is under the stars in the distant Kalahari Desert, with a nine foot lioness nibbling at her toes in her sleeping bag and another breathing hotly down her neck, and eight more sniffing in a circle around her. Delia is a hundred trackless miles away from any help. And on another occasion she crouches alone in her flimsy tent with aggressive lions padding all around, uprooting the stakes, pawing at the canvas while she frantically empties her trunk so she can climb in it and take refuge.²

Most of us would dread such a nightmarish experience as much as we dread going through the

² Mark and Delia Owens, *Cry of the Kalahari* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

time of trouble. What led Delia to endure this ordeal?

She loved a man, her husband Mark Owens, and he was either with her as she slept on the ground with the lions or at least she knew he was on his way in the jeep the time when she was alone in the tent. Being married to the right husband made all the difference in the world.

Is there such a thing as being “married” to Christ so that we know He is closer to us during the time of trouble than Mark was to Delia? If so, all our fears could be automatically de-fused. This time of trouble that we have dreaded so much, turns out to be the honeymoon when Christ and His bride get to know each other more intimately than ever before.

Children and youth (and maybe adults) have had nightmares anticipating the terror of living through the coming time of trouble. Some have even prayed that they might be laid to rest before that ordeal comes. And most Christians frankly hope the time of trouble won’t come in their lifetime, at least not soon.

Imagine Delia Owens praying that she might be allowed to die before camping in the Kalahari Desert! Something is radically wrong with our faith if we are so scared of God’s disclosures of the events that precede the return of Christ.

A student colporteur had an experience. He was showing a lady the book entitled *The Return of Jesus*, and trying to arouse her interest in buying a copy. “Oh no,” she exclaimed, “don’t talk to me about the second coming of Christ. I hope He never comes in my day!”

We have developed twin motivations that edge us over into her category: either we are so afraid of the time of trouble that we hope it doesn't come in our day, or we are enjoying our present luxuries so much that we dread enduring the hardships that the time of trouble entails. Either way, many of us appear to hope the Lord will stay away for a long time to come.

If so, it would be a pretty weak "Amen" that we could utter to the last prayer in the Bible that says, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). The destitute who are starving may want Him to come, for they have nothing in this world to love; and the victims of earthquakes or typhoons who keep on losing everything in recurrent disasters can't imagine a time of trouble worse than what they already go through. But, we living in virtual opulence in our fun-oriented culture . . . please, Lord, don't disturb us by Your second coming. We're doing very well as it is, thank You. And of course we'd rather our kids don't have to go through Your time of trouble, either. What a pity that Your second coming has to be such a horrendous affair!

It is true that the Bible picture the closing events of world history as a cataclysmic upheaval of life as we know it. Here is how Joel describes that time:

The joy of people is withered away. . . .

What a dreadful day!

For the day of the Lord is near;

it will come like a destruction from the Almighty. . . .

Let all who live in the land tremble,

for the day of the Lord is coming. . . .

A large and mighty army comes,
such as never was of old

nor ever will be in ages to come. . . .

Before them the land is like the garden of Eden,
behind them, a desert waste. . . .

At the sight of them, nations are in anguish;
Every face turns pale. . . .

Before them the earth shakes,
the sky trembles,
the sun and moon are darkened,
and the stars no longer shine. . . .

The day of the Lord is great;
it is dreadful.

Who can endure it?³

One discerning writer says that "it is often the case that trouble is greater in anticipation than in reality; but this is not true of the crisis before us. The most vivid presentation cannot reach the magnitude of the ordeal."⁴

"A time of trouble" will engulf the world (Dan. 12:1). A new and unhappy development on earth will make His intervention necessary—a final, ominous scene in the last act of the cosmic drama of the ages. Those in rebellion against God will issue a terrible and evil decree causing "as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed, . . . and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name" (Rev. 13:15, 16).

³ Joel 1:12, 15; 2:1-11, NIV.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 622.

In fact, at that fearful time only a few left on earth will not be bent on self-destruction. Christ's second coming will thus literally be a rescue mission of world proportions. As a nation ousts a tyrannical and cruel usurper and welcomes back its true sovereign, so His loyal subjects will long and even plead for His return. In the end, the only sane and reasonable people left on earth will joyously welcome Christ at His glorious return. The Psalmist represents Him as enthroned upon the praises of His people (Ps. 22:3, NIV).

Throughout history, the vast proportion of the inhabitants of earth have joined with the Great Deceiver in his rebellion against God, yet they have not known what they were doing. The murder of Christ fully disclosed that guilt, but the people did not realize it. Christ prayed for them, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). This hidden layer of rebellion is something natural to all human hearts: "All the world [has] become guilty before God" (3:19). Not only did some far-off Jews or Romans crucify Him two millennia ago, but "all alike have sinned" (vs. 23, NEB). Today, we are all alike guilty of the pain sin has caused the heart of God, since its inception.

"The carnal mind is enmity against God, for it is not subject to lie law of God, neither indeed can be" (8:7). Throughout history the sinful, cruel, selfish nature of Satan has led some human beings to act worse than beasts. Surely in many cases, the conventional mores of society and civilization have kept most of these raw forces of evil passion somewhat in control.

But, wars and holocausts have given occasional glimpses of what will happen when these restraints are finally removed. Rioting splashed across the world's TV screens are a stark picture of uncontrolled human nature. Cities wantonly destroy themselves. Innocent people are beaten and nearly murdered for no reason whatever except pent-up, destructive rage against God. People in BMWs and Mercedes drive up to broken-in stores and loot them—people who a few hours before appeared to be the very epitome of law-and-order citizens.

Such wild, insane riots are a foretaste of a fearful "time of trouble" the Bible predicts will develop in growing intensity, around the earth. Christ foretold what will prevail just before the second coming: "There will be . . . on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, . . . men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth." "Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Luke 21:25, 26; Matt. 24:12).

Don't forget that Daniel adds some tremendous "good news" about this time of trouble: "And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: . . . and . . . thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book" (Dan. 12:1).

Michael is another name for Christ which means, "Who is like God?" The angel who was talking with Daniel probably used the name to emphasize the divine-human character of the mighty One who steps forward in the final crisis for the defense of His people. To "stand up" is an idiom to describe

how a king takes over his throne and assumes complete control. The idea is clear: Jesus won't be asleep during the time of trouble!

For Him to "stand up" means that He will enter into a new nearness with His people, something never before realized. He will become a Bridegroom and they will become His bride. Revelation pictures the sublime excitement of this new relationship: "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7). There is an intimacy in marriage that no other relationship can approach. And a bride not only loves her bridegroom; she can't help but respect and trust him implicitly. She is ready to go with him anywhere, even to the perils of the Kalahari. She will gladly share all his future experiences. She is jealous to share his sorrows and pain.

No way will the Lord allow this coming time of trouble to take place until His people collectively "marry" Christ in that capacity as a bride. And this means for them a growing-up "unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13) like a bride is grownup to be able to stand by the side of her bridegroom at the wedding. I don't know what kind of a wedding Mark and Delia Owens had, but I am sure that no little flower girl at the wedding would have been ready to go to wild Africa with him.

A wedding means that now the bridegroom and bride will begin sharing life together. This explains how the coming time of trouble will be the "honeymoon" for Christ and His bride. They will get to know each other intimately as they share the

excitement of that time. And *if* there is to be any pain and sorrow endured by God's people in the time of trouble, you can be sure that Christ will suffer it as much as they.

He is not the one who brings on the time of trouble; He will not cause it in any way. He would love to return the second time in perfectly peaceful circumstances; the time of trouble was never His idea. It is Satan's idea of a farewell party for the saints of God. It will be brought on entirely by the machinations of the wicked who let their hatred of God erupt into a final frenzy of rebellion. Christ will meet this head on as "Michael," the Son of God to be sure but also the Son of man "not ashamed" to call us "brethren" (Heb. 2:14-18). He is a partaker of our "flesh and blood," the new Head of the human race, 100% human as well as 100% divine. Single-handedly He takes on the combined enmity of hell and of the apostate human race in the final defense of His people.

This standing up of "Michael" is the most solemn, awe-inspiring act humans have ever had a chance to see. All the Star Wars and Superman epics of fiction will be eclipsed by the grandeur of His final campaign when He sallies forth:

"I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon Him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and He had a name written, that no man knew, but He himself.

"And He was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and His name is called The Word of God.

And the armies which were in heaven followed Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of His mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and He shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He hath on His vesture and on His thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.⁵

Imagine an awestruck girl overwhelmed by the greatness and goodness of a man whom she can only admire as a hero. And then imagine, if you can, how she would feel if that man were actually to love her and to woo her and to win her as a bride; it's hard to comprehend the thrill of excitement that a mingled sense of virtual worship and conjugal love could inspire. The nearest that any human being has ever come to such a sublime intimacy is the story of Solomon's wooing of the modest Shulamite maid. Evidently she had admired the resplendent king as an unattainable hero larger than life; then he disguised himself as a humble shepherd and won her bridal heart.

This is the theme of the Song of Solomon; faintly it hints of the unprecedented wonder of a people on earth becoming the bride of that Rider on the white horse. John's poetry may imply that those "armies . . . in heaven" who follow Him are collectively that same bride, for he uses identical language to describe their outstanding qualification: they are "clothed in fine linen, white and clean," and the bride herself is also "arrayed in fine linen, clean and

⁵ Revelation 19:11-15; 17:14.

white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints." Christ and His bride together face the challenge of the time of trouble, when His enemies "make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for He is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with Him are called, and chosen, and faithful." It will be a thrilling encounter.

Why should any of us who are "*with Him*" be afraid? It's what we were made for, as when a bride who finally says, "I do" realizes in her soul that all of life's past experiences were simply a prelude to bring her to that fulfilling moment.

But now we have some problems and questions to consider. How can we get over being afraid that maybe our names are not "written in the book" that guarantees deliverance in the time of trouble? And how can we earthbound humans ever learn to relate to Christ in the way that Delia learned to relate to her Mark?

The "old man" has one last stand he takes. The last bastion he holds is covetousness of reward and its natural bulwark—fear of personal loss. It is of course severely anti-cross.

There was present in the first sin of man a desire for equality with God, to be as God, to possess natural immortality. Our first parents knew no fear until they cherished that desire. That same fear will underlie the last sin of man; and the cross is the only way to exchange it for love. But what we call love is not love if fear is its foundation. Self-interest is not the basis of genuine love, which is *agape*. The search for one's own security is the reverse of genuine love. This is evident from what John says,

“There is no fear in love [*agape*]; but perfect love [*agape*] casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

John is discussing our basic problem of anxiety. We are all born with it. Its “torment” is expressed in many ways, including diseases of the body that have their source in this underlying bedrock of anxiety.

When Christ, “the Sun of Righteousness,” arises in the heart, there is “healing in His wings” (Mal. 4:2). The healing comes with the casting out of fear and anxiety.

Through the crucifixion of the “old man,” the self is “crucified with Christ.” Anxiety is the fear in which the self is nourished. Although fear is something open that we can see, like a railroad train bearing down upon us, anxiety is a fear that is beneath the surface, a dread we cannot tangibly recognize and identify in the open, because the real identity of the “old man” is never full and complete.

How does love cast out fear? The bridge that spans the last chasm between us and full fellowship with Christ is the surrender of the will in precisely the same way that Christ, in our flesh, surrendered His will. “By that will [God’s] we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

Therefore we have “boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh” (Heb. 10:10, 19, 20). As He surrendered His will to the Father, He fulfilled that love. As we surrender our will to Him, that same love is forthwith

fulfilled in us. The way to boldness is through His flesh.

Anxiety is basically what the Bible calls the “fear of death.” What we have called “death” the Bible calls “sleep.” Few fear that. Our “fear of death” is that of the *second* death, a fear of the nakedness, aloneness, forsakenness, the horror of great darkness, that comes when one is forever separated from the life and light of God and His great universe of joy. This buried anxiety touches every aspect of our waking life and even intrudes upon us in our dreams. We have seen that only as we sense the dimensions of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross can we possibly come to grips with that problem of naked anxiety.

If someone gave you a precious gift, your most natural response would be to say a fervent thank you. And, further, according to the value of the gift, your most natural response would be a desire to demonstrate your gratitude to the friend for what he did. This capacity for glad, thankful response is built into your human nature, a part of the package that is you. It is almost instinctive. Dozens of times a day we will catch ourselves saying thank you for kindnesses done, and as often will we find ourselves watching for opportunities to respond.

This simple, unaffected, uncomplicated response of our humanity is all that God has ever asked from anyone. Christ gave Himself for us on the cross. If we don’t see it, or can’t sense how there was any real gift or sacrifice involved, there will naturally be no response of loving sacrifice on our part, only the self-centered desire for our own personal security

which leaves fear still intact. Such a half-hearted, lukewarm response is inevitable from anyone's heart when Satan succeeds in obscuring the reality of what Christ gave for us. But when we see what happened at Calvary, something does begin to move us. "Through death [the second death]" Christ destroyed "him who had the power of death, that is, the devil," and thus released "those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14, 15).

Truly, our search is begun. As Satan seeks more and more to ensnare us in the allurements of self-seeking, sensual or material, we shall find something wonderful happening. As "sin abounds;" the stronger grace of Christ will "much more abound." As we remember the cross, Satan will be defeated continually. Many people all around the world will respond exactly as Paul did.

"We are *ruled by* the love of Christ, now that we recognize that one Man died for everyone, which means that they all share in His death. He died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but only for Him who died and was raised to life for their sake." (2 Cor. 5:14, 15, TEV).

It simply becomes almost impossible for anyone who sees it to live any longer unto himself? Talk about power. This must be what Paul meant when he said, "The message of the cross . . . is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

Power for what? To change that most changeless thing—a self-centered human mind. The old patterns of thought are changed, and love *rules*.

It actually becomes easy to follow Christ! Jesus promised that it would be when He said, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:30). The cross supplies the missing element.

There was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all his opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his very kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him? She would say she loved him of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she left behind. Would she be happy at his side? How could he know? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross over the gulf between them. The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend. He clothed himself as a beggar and approached her cottage incognito, with a worn cloak fluttering loosely about him. He renounced the throne to win her hand.