

## STORMY LESSONS

### Introduction

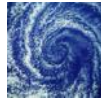
In the face of the devastation wrought by many hurricanes in recent years, no rational person can help but ask:

- What in the world is happening?
- What's going on with the increase of Category 5 hurricanes?
- Is God trying to say something to us?
- Does the Bible say anything specific about such events?
- Are there some *Stormy Lessons* we need to be learning from these hurricanes?

I believe the answer to the last three questions is a resounding Yes! While I am not saying, "Thus saith the Lord" in this message, I am saying that we have a clear word of prophecy from God's Word about such events (II Peter 1:19).

Therefore, I want to share with you what I believe are 12 *Stormy Lessons* we can learn from these recent hurricanes. Many chapters could be written on each one of these lessons, but I will only share a few principles and scriptures under each heading.

First and foremost, these powerful storms and hurricanes remind us of...



## **THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**

The Bible is clear in its revelation of God's absolute sovereignty in the universe. Sovereignty simply means that there is no power that is superior to His. God is the supreme Ruler of the cosmos, and apart from Him there are no other gods (Isaiah 45:5). His sovereignty is not one of a passive, impassionate deistic prime mover. God is not an impersonal sovereign who has created the universe, wound it up like a clock and is now sitting back watching it run down into oblivion! No! A thousand times No!

The Bible teaches from Genesis to Revelation that God's sovereignty is both providential and benevolent. That means that His will for mankind is good and not evil. As Christians often say, "God is good all the time; all the time God is good!" God is passionately involved in the universe He has created. He is always working behind the scenes for our ultimate good and His own glory. The heart of the sovereign God who created and sustains this universe is one that is motivated by love, mercy and grace.

Therefore, let me remind you of just a few of the many verses about God's absolute sovereignty over ALL of the events in His universe.

In the book of Job – probably the oldest book in the Bible – we read the familiar story of a righteous man whose entire life was ravaged by a powerful series of storms, much like the dual assaults of Katrina and Rita upon millions of people on the Gulf Coast. That's what makes this ancient story so contemporary and relevant to our present condition. In the wake of Job's disasters, three of his so-called "friends" came alongside him as he sat mourning in sack cloth and ashes. Over and over again they accused him of wrong doing. Their reasoning was one that is still popular today:

"Job, there must be sin in your life or you would not be suffering all of these calamities. If your life was pleasing to God, then you would not be experiencing all of these personal, family and financial losses."

Sound familiar? Perhaps those same questions have tormented your own soul when you've experienced personal tragedy or loss. This discussion between Job and his friends goes on for over 30 chapters. Their accusations and insinuations are relentless! But in the process, they cause Job to do some serious soul-searching. Finally God cries out "ENOUGH!" He then turns the tables and cross-examines Job and his accusers about these calamities. God points out to them their nearsighted, truncated, temporal, earthbound perspective of things:

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm, 'Who is this that darkens My counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Tell Me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick

darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther: here is where your proud waves halt?’” (Job 38:1-11).

If you carefully read through God’s rhetorical questions to Job about creation and the nature of things, you will hear loud and clear the theme of His absolute benevolent sovereignty. Over and over again Job had asked “Why?” in the midst of his tragedies. In response, God asks Job over 70 questions – all of which center on “Who?” God drives home the point to Job about Who is in control of all things – from beginning to end. So after four chapters of revelation and reasoning, God concludes:

“Who then is able to stand against Me? Who has a claim against Me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to Me” (Job 41:10-11).

After hearing God’s perspective concerning His sovereignty over all things, Job humbly confesses:

“I know that You can do all things; no plan of Yours can be thwarted...Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know...My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:1-6).

As we struggle with our questions about major natural disasters, we would do well to also humble ourselves like Job did, and repent in dust and ashes before our sovereign and holy God! Most importantly, we can rise out of the dust and ashes of our tragedy with a greater understanding of God and a more personal relationship with Him. Our relationship with God can move from secondhand to firsthand. We too can say “My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You.” Certainly such revelation and personal encounter with the true and living God is worth going through any storm!

So because of his storms, Job’s knowledge of God radically changed. His relationship with Him grew from the impersonal to the personal, from the transcendent to the immanent, from the abstract to the intimate.

We can also see God’s revelation of His absolute sovereignty over all human circumstances in His conversation with Moses. As you will recall, Moses was trying to cop out on obeying God’s call to be His spokesman to Pharaoh. He felt he was not an eloquent enough speaker to represent God and confront Pharaoh. I am sure we would have felt the same sense of inadequacy in the face of such an assignment! So God reminded Moses of His sovereignty over man’s mouth – and over every other part of his body:

“Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, I will help you speak and will teach you what to say” (Exodus 4:11-12).

Those are hard verses for many people to accept theologically and to digest spiritually. They do not seem to fit our preconceived concepts of God. We prefer to believe that it is God who created the mouth, but Satan who makes it mute. Or it is God who created the ear and eye, but Satan who makes one deaf and the other blind. That’s because we perceive one as good and the other as bad. But God’s perspective is not the same as ours. In this passage God accepts full responsibility for both. That’s strong theological medicine, but totally Biblical!

It is only because of His sovereignty that God can make a person mute so he can become eloquent in spirit. He causes one to be born physically blind so he can spiritually see. He makes another deaf so he can hear things in the spirit realm more clearly. The Bible exhorts us to learn to see the sovereign hand of God behind, beneath and beyond all things.

Through the prophet Isaiah, we can also hear God speaking of His absolute sovereignty over ALL of the events in this universe:

“I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from Me, there is no God...I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things” (Isaiah 45:5-7).

So God affirms ultimate responsibility for “all things.” We can theologically debate whether or not a particular event is God’s active will, permissive will, or ultimate will, and never come to a clear conclusion. But in unambiguous terms, He accepts full culpability for every event in the universe. Whether it is a disaster or delight, whether it results in pain or pleasure, whether it hurts or heals, God is sovereign over everything!

We hear the same message of divine sovereignty through the words of Amos, the minor prophet with a major message, “When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” (Amos 3:6)

Do we always understand the sovereign hand of God? Absolutely not! Can we fully comprehend why God brings disaster to one city and spares others? No! Whether it is the destruction of ancient cities and countries like Egypt, Babylon, Edom, Pompey, Tyre and Sidon, Capernaum or Jerusalem, there is often a mystery in many of God’s ways over the affairs of man that we will never understand this side of eternity.

John Piper poignantly wrote this summary about God’s mingled judgment and mercy toward Katrina victims:

“Whatever judgment has fallen, it is we who deserve it – all of us. And whatever mercy is mingled with judgment in New Orleans neither we nor they deserve it...Our guilt in the face of Katrina is not that we can’t see the intelligence in God’s design, but that we can’t see arrogance in our own heart. God will always be guilty of high crimes for those who think they’ve never committed any...This will always be ludicrous to those who put the life of man above the glory of God. Until our hearts are broken...for the God-insulting rebellion of human sin, we will not see intelligent design in the way God mingles mercy and judgment in this world...Every mouth is stopped and the whole world is accountable before God. There is only one hope to escape the flood of God’s wrath. It is not the levee of human virtue but the high ground called Calvary” (*World*, Sept. 17, 2005, p. 43).

Therefore, there is one thing we know for certain, God does not ignore the wickedness and evil of man. It is all an affront to His holiness and an offense against His will. He is taking all of man’s evil into account and will one day requite perfect judgment against every form of sin and rebellion. Sometimes He gives us a wakeup call through storms. Note these timely words from an ancient prophet:

“The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on His foes and maintains His wrath against His enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power; the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished. *His way is in the whirlwind and the storm*” (Nahum 1:2-3).

Here the prophet Nahum reminds us of both the power and patience of God, as well as the wrath and grace of God. Often both are simultaneously manifest *in the whirlwind and the storm*.

But as the old Christian sages often said about God: “When you can’t trace His hand, you can still trust His heart.” That’s because the sovereign hands upholding and guiding the universe have nail scars in them as an eternal sign of His redeeming love for us!

It is because of the principle of sovereignty that Paul could write those greatly beloved words:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Romans 8:28-29).

Note carefully that Paul did not say that all things are *good* in and of themselves. Many very bad things happen to good people. That’s because we live in a fallen universe, as we will see shortly in this study. But what Paul does affirm is that our sovereign and gracious God is at work in *all things* to bring about our good and His glory. What glorifies Him most? That we will be increasingly conformed to the likeness of His Son! Therefore, our Abba, Father, will allow us to go through anything – and all things – so that spiritual transformation can take place!

Let me summarize this first principle with a simple illustration of God’s sovereignty. When you carefully look at the word sovereignty, you will see that the word “reign” is in the center of the word. You spell it this way: sove-REIGN-ty. That reminds us of the truth of this significant Biblical term that “God reigns over all of the events in our universe” – as well as over all of the events of your personal life! He is reigning and ruling over all that threatens to ruin you!

It is only because of the truth of God’s sovereignty that Paul could proclaim this benediction:

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay Him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen” (Romans 11:33-36).

The second *Stormy Lesson* we must learn from these hurricanes is about...



## **THE SINFULNESS OF MAN**

Soon after the hurricane subsided, we saw a fresh outpouring of man's sinfulness in devastated cities like New Orleans and Biloxi. As the veneer of civility was washed away, and as law and order broke down, we quickly saw the true nature of the sin and the depravity of man.

Alive and in living color, we watched the horror show of people smashing into stores and looting everything they could carry away in the rising murky waters. We read stories of how vicious gangs terrorized people in the streets, shot at rescue helicopters trying to save people, looted hospitals of lifesaving drugs for their own sick addictions, and raped innocent women and girls, all of whom had already been violated and ravaged by the storm!

Max Lucado summarized the human carnage:

"We are people of both dignity and depravity. The hurricane blew back more than roofs; it blew the mask off the nature of mankind. The main problem in the world is not Mother Nature, but human nature. Strip away the police barricades, blow down the fences, and the real self is revealed. We are barbaric to the core...And when the Katrinas of life blow in, our true nature is revealed and our deepest need is unveiled: a need deeper than food, more permanent than firm levees. We need, not a new system, but a new nature" (*What Katrina Can Teach Us?*).

Once again, through the twin terrors of Katrina and Rita, we witnessed how a disaster always reveals our true human nature. In the wake of the hurricanes, we saw the best and worst, the good and evil, the highest and the lowest, the noble and the depraved.

If the "heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1), then the streets declare the "sinfulness of man!" That's why David cried out:

"I see violence and strife in the city. Day and night they prowl about on its walls; malice and abuse are within it. Destructive forces are at work in the city; threats and lies never leave its streets" (Psalm 55:9-11; Isaiah 59:1-10; Jeremiah 6:7).

When you look up, you see the glory of God. When you look in or look out, you see the gory of man!

The Bible assures us that we are all born in sin, shaped in iniquity, and reared in depravity (Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:23)! As a result, we are all *sinner by birth* and *sinner by choice*.

Hosea 10:12 reminds us, "You have planted wickedness, you have reaped evil; you have eaten the fruit of deception."

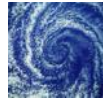
Both the Bible and history painfully demonstrate that the *heart of man* is always the *heart of the problem*. That's why Jesus was absolutely correct in his diagnosis when He said:

“Out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

Those words sound as contemporary as the events that followed the devastation of Katrina and Rita and other hurricanes that preceded these stormy twin sisters!

Therefore, let me issue a fresh WARNING: A nation that continues to abort and murder over a million babies a year, that justifies sexual perversion and sanction homosexual unions, that raises revenue through legalized gambling, that is addicted to prosperity and pleasure at any cost – is certainly not pleasing to God! All this does is to invite and invoke the wrath of a holy and just God!

The third Stormy Lesson we need to freshly learn is...



## ***THE SUFFERING OF NATURE***

These increasing storms remind us that we live in a universe that is upside-down. The realm of nature is radically out of balance. As beautiful and majestic as it is, nature still has a fierce, capricious and unpredictable side. At times Mother Nature\* can be captivating to the degree of evoking wonder and awe! But in a moment of time she can turn against us with inexplicable wrath and destruction! At times she smiles on us with warm sunshine, soft breezes, fragrant flowers, delicious fruit, abundant crops, magnificent sunrises, breathtaking sunsets, colorful changing seasons, and gentle snowfalls.

But at other times she seems to thunder against us with violent tropical storms, powerful hurricanes, destructive tornados, cataclysmic cyclones, killer tidal waves, tsunamis and typhoons. Angrily, she blows against us with winds that destroy everything in its path; she strips and shreds the foliage with an unrelenting barrage of hailstones. She unleashes clouds of water against us with torrential rains that result in massive flooding and mud slides. She strikes the forests with lightning that ignites massive forest fires that consume everything in their paths; she blisters the earth with searing droughts that result in a slow agonizing death to everything that has life!

Mother Nature, then, can sometimes be a nurturer, and at other times she can be a nightmare!

How do we make sense of Mother Nature's radical mood swings? How can we make any sense out of such extremes in our weather patterns?

I think that God gives us the answer in His Word. You might call it *God's Weather Forecast*. Listen to these insightful words from the pen of the Apostle Paul:

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning, as in the pains of childbirth right up to this present time. Not only so, but we ourselves...groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:19-23).

Do you understand what Paul is trying to say in this passage? He is reminding his readers that creation is groaning under a curse that we deserved. When our primal parents sinned in the Garden of Eden – a perfect world of beauty, bounty and balance – God should have ended the human race. His righteousness and holiness required that man be fully accountable for his willful rebellion and sin.

God had told Adam and Eve that they would “surely die” as a result of any willful disobedience on their part. So they sinned with their eyes wide open to the clear consequences of death! In the face of their willful rebellion and sin, God should have blasted Adam and Eve with immediate

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\* I am not using the term “Mother Nature” as she is often believed in by some neo-pagan worshipers in our culture. I am using it only as a popular personification that people often use it in reference to nature.

judgment and death, ending the human race forever. But because of His love, mercy and grace, He cursed the ground instead. The decay and death that should have immediately been their lot was inflicted upon nature.

Genesis reminds us of this tragic judgment upon the natural world:

“To Adam God said...‘Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground’” (Genesis 3:17-19).

This was the first act of substitutionary atonement, where something innocent was punished in place of someone guilty. God cursed nature *instead of* Adam and Eve. In other words, nature took their punishment. When man fell, nature also took a fall.

As a result of this substitutionary curse, the beauty, balance and bounty of Eden were lost forever. Now there would be enmity, hostility, strife, and struggle between man and nature. Thorns, thistles, weeds, briars, mildew, fungi, disease, and death would attack and compete with man on every side. He would now only feed himself and stay alive through great toil. He would have to sweat it out from birth to death!

In another context Jesus said, “God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rains on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). As we have seen, most of the time those sunrises bring life, and the rains nourish growth. But at other times, that same sun blisters and scorches, and those rains come in the form of violent hurricanes that destroy everything in their paths!

As long as we live on planet Earth, we will be subject to the violent groanings in the natural realm. Since we all live *East of Eden*, we will from time to time groan inwardly because the natural world around us is also groaning in travail under the curse that was inflicted upon her as a result of man’s sin and rebellion. Until we receive the redemption of our bodies, the natural realm cannot be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

It is important to note that both Christ and Paul likened these convulsions of Mother Nature to birth pains. As every woman who has ever given birth knows, birth pains become more frequent and more intense as the time of birth draws near. Therefore, every woman who has given birth has done so in the midst of a lot of agonizing groaning! But the groaning of labor results in the glory of childbirth! Once the healthy child is born, the groaning is turned into glory!

This assures us, then, that there is soon coming the birth of a new world order! It will not be brought into being by some grand political scheme by man. It will not happen as a result of financial prosperity for all of the world’s people. It will not be genetically engineered as scientists and geneticists perfect their manipulation of our DNA. Nor will this new world order be orchestrated by sociologists and psychologists who finally solve the conflicts of xenophobia, prejudice and racism.

No, God is going to birth a new cosmos through the Second Coming of His Son that will not have any curse upon it, and it will be magnificent beyond description! It will literally be a return to Eden, or heaven on earth!

But until that curse is removed, we must brace ourselves for frequent and intense groanings brought on by the world of nature. However, this is where Christianity is different from the other religions of the world. Because of our spiritual “adoption as sons,” as Paul described it, we are not left alone in our struggles against the groanings of Mother Nature. Christ has sent His Holy Spirit to live within the believer to be his Comforter during times of groaning, regardless of the cause. Note carefully Paul’s words:

“In the same way [that nature groans and Christians groan], the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Romans 8:26-27).

Until the Lord returns, we will all experience not only the *groaning of creation* and the *groaning of the Christian*, but also the *groaning of the Comforter!* The child of God never groans alone! The indwelling Holy Spirit “intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” That’s a blessing that no other world religion, human philosophy or psychological therapy can offer!

Buddha does not groan with his adherents; Mohammed does not groan with his followers; Krishna does not groan with his worshipers. Only the true and living God groans with His children through His indwelling Holy Spirit! He will groan with us until our *groaning is turned into glory* and our *agony is exchanged for ecstasy!*

Next, we need to learn afresh the *Stormy Lesson* about...



## **THE SUPERFICIALITY OF OUR FOUNDATIONS**

Because of His unrelenting love, mercy and grace, God often sends storms to test and try our foundations. He does this in order to help us avoid destruction.

Jesus ended His famous Sermon on the Mount with a timely parable:

“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. Then rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell with a great crash” (Matthew 7:24-27).

After finishing what has been called the Greatest Sermon Ever Preached, Jesus gave a challenging invitation. He told His audience that they had to move from *information* to *application*. Just hearing Him preach and teach was not enough. That was an important first step, but not the last. He exhorted them now to move from *information* to *application*, which required *motivation*.

While His preaching and teaching had informed their minds and inspired their emotions, they could only be changed if they engaged their wills.

Jesus closed His sermon by exhorting them to personalize the truths by putting them into practice. It was this *application* process that separated the wise man from the foolish man. The storms that both of them went through tested their foundation. The principle is clear: *The storms of life reveal the foundation upon which our lives are built.*

Not moving from *information* to *application* is what James called being a “hearer of the word” rather than a “doer of the Word” (James 1:22).

Jesus spoke about the danger of surface Christianity and superficial spirituality in His Parable of the Sower and Seed. He pointed out the superficiality of the Word of God seed that fell on shallow and hard hearts:

“The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is like the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When troubles or persecution comes because of the Word, he quickly falls away” (Matthew 13:20-21).

All over America and the world, people continue to build their houses in danger zones, places that are regularly subjected to hurricanes, tornados, floods, mud slides, forest fires, or earthquakes. So they should not be surprised when their dream home turns into a nightmare by one of the storms of life! It is indeed a *Stormy Lesson* – and a costly one – to try to defy the laws of nature in a groaning and convulsing universe!

What so many people do physically by building in areas prone to natural disaster, they also do spiritually, because they do not build their lives on obedience to God's Word!

That's why I have always loved that great old hymn that resounds with this truth:

“How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!  
What more can He say than to you He hath said,  
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?”

But note especially the relevance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza:

“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all sufficient, shall be they supply;  
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design,  
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.”

So, my friend, is your foundation *superficial* or is it *secure*? Is your life built upon the sand of superficial spirituality or is it built upon the solid bedrock of God's Word? If your life is not built upon the rock, then I can assure you that it is just a matter of time before your life falters in the face of one of life's storms!

Another *Stormy Lesson* we can learn from these recent hurricanes is...



## THE SNARE OF MATERIALISM

Materialism is seductive by nature. Whether we live in the first century or the twenty first century, materialism has a subtle snare to it. Because we are spiritual beings who live in a physical body, we naturally have a taste for material things. They are charming and alluring to us. They promise us happiness if we possess them. So we pursue possessions with a passion! Before we realize it, *our possessions possess us*. We have been ensnared by our insatiable appetite for more *things*.

Certainly there is nothing wrong with things, per se. But we live in a time when we have become more and more obsessed with the accumulation of *stuff*! In America we are a consumer-oriented society. That's why we have far more shopping malls in America than we have schools!

We probably also have more retail outlets than we have churches. As a result, we worship at a materialistic altar. While few Americans have physical idols in their homes to pagan gods like Buddha or Krishna, millions of us have materialistic idols all around us!

The advertisers and merchandisers have switched the price tags on us. We have bought into their value perversion that has caused us to "love things and use people" rather than "use things and love people!" In our society, riches have become more important than relationships – and prosperity has become more valued than people. Our priorities are perverted and inverted.

In America today our favorite past time is shopping, looking for more *stuff* – the latest *ticky-tacky* – that we think will bring happiness to our lives! As a result, most of us "shop till we drop" – or until one of life's storms drops us! Our philosophy is: "When things get tough, the tough go shopping!" A shopping binge has become the cure-all for our every woe! Just as some people are addicted to alcohol, drugs or chocolate, most Americans are addicted to shopping! We are all vulnerable to the mystical allurements of that one unique material *thing* that will set us apart from everyone else and will bring us that elusive permanent satisfaction. Even though God created us in such a way that the whole world cannot fill or satisfy the human heart, we still shop on!

We are all familiar with the popular Yuppie maxim that stated, "He who dies with the most toys wins!" The only problem with that philosophy is that it is so short-sighted. Even if you do amass a bunch of toys, you still die, and you can't take any of it with you! All of those toys and all of that *stuff* is left behind in your drawers, closets, attics, garages, and storage buildings.

All it takes is a hurricane like Katrina or Rita to show us how fragile and superficial that way of life is. When your life is at stake, or that of your spouse, children or grandchildren, all of your materialistic *toys* suddenly become meaningless. When the life of a loved one is hanging in the balance, you are not concerned about your SUV, your expensive sports car, your designer wardrobe, your *overstuffed* leather furniture, your wall-sized plasma TV, or the amount of stocks in your financial portfolio. Suddenly your relationships become far more important than your riches!

Jesus warned against the snare of materialism that so seductively seduces us and convinces us that happiness and success come from *things*. In His disturbing Parable of the Rich Fool, He

gave this stark warning: “Be on guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

He then told the familiar story of the rich farmer who had enjoyed a bumper crop year after year. He had more abundance than he could personally consume. Neither his house nor barns could hold all of his *stuff*. It never crossed his mind to share it with others. He selfishly mused to himself:

“What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops. Then he said, ‘This is what I will do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself: ‘You have plenty of good things [*stuff*] laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’

But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21).

Jesus then summarized it: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26)

James, the brother of Jesus, gave a similar stern warning to the wealthy of this world – and that includes most of us Americans:

“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter” (James 5:1-5).

Wow! What sobering words! What a timely warning to so many of us American Christians who have fully bought into the lifestyle of *conspicuous consumption*! Like so many in James’ day, we have hoarded wealth so that we could live on earth in *luxury and self-indulgence*.

When I read those searing words of indictment, I am also reminded of God’s stern condemnation of His ancient people in Israel:

“You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions” (Amos 6:4-6).

Do you see how many of God’s ancient people were caught up in the *conspicuous consumption* of their day? Did you note the materialistic excesses of their selfish and luxurious lifestyles that abounded with costly furniture, sumptuous eating, vintage wine and the finest of Oil of Olay for their bodies – all the while serenaded by music orchestrated to lull them further into comfortable mediocrity! Indeed, “the more things change, the more they stay the same!”

God also chastised His people for being more concerned with building their own lavish houses while ignoring His temple – which was to be the spiritual center of their lives:

“Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?...My house remains a ruin while each of you is busy with his own house” (Haggai 1:4).

Certainly God is not against us building nice comfortable houses to live in. But He does want us to keep our lives in balance, which is a great battle for every American Christian! It is the subtle snare of materialism that always drives us to want more! MORE! MORE!!! And in our pursuit of prosperity, we usually neglect God’s work. We lose the spiritual center of our lives and become materialistic. In the process we lose our spiritual priority and eternal perspective. God has to take a back seat. His priorities become marginalized. There is a subtle drift from the spiritual to the material. In the process we become far more interested in the growth of *our* kingdom than the expansion of *His* Kingdom. We increasingly live for *our* glory rather than for *His* glory. That’s the snare of materialism!

The Bible calls the seductive nature of materialism for what it is – *greed* – which is, in reality, *idolatry*. That’s why Paul lists the idolatrous worship of things right alongside other grosser sins:

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and *greed which is idolatry*. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (Colossians 3:5-8).

So Paul identifies our greedy desire for more things as idolatry and lists it with a lot of other sins of the flesh. Is it any wonder, then, that he also gave these words of instruction to Timothy about the proper use of wealth, after first warning him about the love of money in his own ministry?

“Command those who are rich in this present world [which includes most all Americans!], not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasures for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (I Timothy 6:17-19).

Jesus taught about this same danger in His Parable of the Sower. The seed that fell among the thorns was overcrowded with things – *stuff*.

“The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth, choke it, making it unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22).

How many of us Americans continue to be deluded by the deceitfulness of wealth? In the lives of millions of Christians, the vitality of their spiritual lives has been smothered and choked out by their material *stuff*! Rather than being fruitful disciples that glorify God (John 15:1-8), they largely

become unfruitful Christians. All it takes is a hurricane like Katrina or Rita to sweep away all of their possessions and reveal how barren and hollow their lives really were all along.

Let me close this *Stormy Lesson* with the saddest story that I personally heard about when I went to Mississippi to inspect the Hurricane destruction. An African-American woman with the National Guard told it to me. She was there before Katrina hit to help with the mandatory evacuation efforts. After the storm had passed, she was sent back in to help with the emergency rescue and relief effort. She was personally involved with this story.

When the Guard was going house-to-house to urge people to evacuate, they came to a home with a father, mother and two young children. The man's hobby, or obsession, was restoring old cars. He had a Camaro that he had spent many months restoring to vintage shape, at great expense. The body was beautifully painted. The interior was perfectly restored to its original condition. The only problem was that the engine was not completely overhauled, so it didn't run yet.

The man was told to leave with his family as quickly as possible. He refused. He said, "I am not going to leave without my Camaro." They urged him again about the severity of the storm, but he stubbornly refused to leave.

As the skies grew darker and the winds increased, the man's wife begged him to leave and take her and the children to safety. He loudly refused. The National Guard came back for one final warning. He continued to protest: "I will not leave without my Camaro!"

So he locked himself, his wife and two children in the house. After the hurricane moved northward, the Guard went back to that area, going from house-to-house, searching for survivors, especially where there was some semblance of a house still standing.

When they came to the house where this family had lived, it was largely destroyed. The man's prized Camaro was still in the garage, though badly damaged. And in the rubble of the locked house? Four bodies: the man, his wife and two children! They were buried in a row in the local cemetery.

This man had been so snared by material things that it cost him his life, and that of his wife and two children! What perverted priorities! What needless deaths! What senseless tragedies! What a costly *Stormy Lesson* to learn!

Let me ask you, "What is the Camaro in your life? What material possession is possessing you? Where have you been ensnared by materialism? Where has the deceitfulness of riches perverted your priorities? Where and why have you been storing up wealth in these last days?"

How you honestly answer those questions will determine if your life will stand up under the hurricanes of life. Your answers will reveal the true love and location of your heart's treasure. As you prayerfully ponder your answer to these questions, let me remind you of the timeless words of the Lord Jesus about *things*.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

A final question: "Where are your true treasures?" If you have them secured in heaven, then your life is totally hurricane proof!

Now, let's consider the next *Stormy Lesson* about...



## **THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES**

I fear that there are millions in America and even in the church who are like the religious leaders of Christ's day. Remember His words of sarcastic condemnation to the Pharisees and Sadducees who were trying to provoke Him to "show them a sign from heaven." Note His reply:

"When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning: 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Matthew 16:1-3).

It is from this teaching that we get the popular weather forecasting maxim known to all sailors: "Red skies in the morning, sailors take warning; red skies at night, sailors delight!"

Jesus was obviously not having a discussion about the weather, which is always a popular subject when people get together. He was not trying to give them tips on how to make better weather forecasts. No, He was chastising them over their inability to make *spiritual* weather forecasts. While they were astute at making *physical* weather forecasts, they had totally lost their ability to make correct *spiritual* weather forecasts. These very learned religious leaders could interpret the signs in the natural realm concerning the weather, but they had become totally blind to the signs of the times that were happening all around them in the spiritual realm.

Even though these leaders had all of the Scriptures – the Torah, the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms – they could not interpret the signs God was giving them through the incarnation of His Messiah. Through the person of Jesus Christ, God was literally "in their face" with spiritual signs, but they had become so willfully blind that they could not recognize the revelation that was right in front of them. It was not that they *could* not see, but that they *would* not see! That's the danger of willful blindness.

While we do not have time in this short booklet to study all of the signs of the times that Jesus prophesied would prelude His Second Coming, we need to at least know where they are in the Gospels: Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. Jesus gave this private teaching to them, known as the Olivet Discourse, in response to their question, "what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"

In His lengthy answer to them, Jesus talked about specific signs of the times that would increasingly be manifest in nature, in the spirit realm, in government and politics, in society, in Israel, and among His followers. But Jesus also reminded them that these would be just "the beginning of birth pains" (Mark 13:8). As we saw earlier, two characteristics of birth pains is that there is an increase in frequency and intensity as the time of birth draws near.

One of the natural signs that Jesus foretold is especially worth noting in the wake of the killer tsunami in Asia, and the yearly series of devastating hurricanes in America:

“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the *roaring and tossing of the sea*. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world” (Luke 21:25-26).

I don't know about you, but that certainly sounds to me like the description of things like tsunamis, tropical storms, hurricanes and typhoons – all of which come from the sea!

But what did Jesus say the response of His disciples should be in the face of these signs of the times? He responds with a series of action verbs (Matthew 24:44-47; Mark 13:33-35):

- Be on guard!
- Be alert!
- Be ready!
- Be busy!
- Be prepared!
- Be watching!

While the people of the world are “in anguish and perplexity...fainting from terror and apprehensive of what is coming on the world,” God's people are to be both confident and calm. We can be “calm, cool and collected” only because we have been warned in advance about the certainty of these things. Through the Bible we have the most timely and trustworthy Advance Warning System ever made known to man! That's why Jesus told His disciples, “See, I have told you ahead of time” (Matthew 24:25). To be *forewarned* is to be *forearmed*.

Instead of wringing our hands in fearful anticipation, Jesus said we are to “stand up and lift up our heads because our redemption is drawing near.” The child of God can view these natural events through faith rather than through fear. “When you see these things happening,” Jesus said, “you know that the Kingdom of God is near” (Luke 21:28-31). He assures us, then, that these increased birth pains in the natural world are ushering in the Kingdom of God. These events announce that a “new world order” is about to be birthed by God from heaven – not by man from earth!

While we have absolutely no control over the frequency and intensity of these birth pains in the natural realm, we do have one priority from the spiritual realm – *evangelism!* That's why Jesus said:

“And this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

For the informed and obedient Christian, global evangelism will be the highest priority in his living, praying, giving and going! Nothing could be clearer from even a cursory study of the *signs of the times!*

One other important matter about this “end times forecast.” The final destruction of the physical world will not be by water but by *fire*. It will not come from the oceans, but from God's wrath. It will not result in the end of the *world* as many people wrongly believe, but in the end of the *age* (Matthew 13:39; 24:3). That's why Jesus' last promise to us was that He would be with us until the “end of the age” – not to the end of the world (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus also warned His disciples – and us – about the sudden and unexpected nature of this final series of cataclysmic events that would bring down the curtain of human history:

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field, one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come...So you must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him” (Matthew 24:36-44).

Jesus warned His disciples that there would be a prevailing “business as usual” attitude before His sudden and expected Second Coming. People will be making long term plans that did not include God. Spiritual things will have slipped completely off of their radar screens. Just as the masses of people in Noah’s day did not have a clue about what would happen until the flood came and washed them away, so it will be with the majority of humanity when the Lord returns again!

But as we have already seen, Christ has alerted and warned us ahead of time (Matthew 24:25). He has given us clear advance warning so we will be prepared. He has told us the *signs of the times* to be watching for that would assure us that “the Kingdom of God is near” and about to invade and supplant the kingdoms of man!

Peter echoed these words as he wrote to the early Christians at the end of the first century:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (II Peter 3:10).

After this brief description of the *day of the Lord* that will usher in the *end of the age*, Peter gave a very practical application:

“Since everything will be destroyed in this way, *what kind of people ought you to be?* You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him. Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation...Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men, and fall from your secure position” (II Peter 3:11-17).

Could anything be clearer about how we should be living in this brief parenthesis of time between Christ's First and Second Advent?! I think not. For most of us as Christians, it is not a lack of knowledge but a lack of obedience!

Rather than live by His priorities and *speed His coming*, we hope He will delay His return so we will have more time to accumulate things – and play with our *stuff!* While we are trifling with our toys, the material world is headed for a certain and total purging by fire. Then all of our *stuff* will be reduced to ashes!

As we continue to watch these *signs of the times* in the natural realm, may we be like those ancient sons of Issachar, “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (I Chronicles 12:32).

Now, let's turn our attention to the most important *Stormy Lesson* of all...



## **THE SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST**

The word *salvation* primarily means a “deliverer, rescuer, redeemer, savior.” Every Christian knows that Jesus is the “Savior of the world.” When the angels announced His birth to the shepherds, they exclaimed: “Today...a Savior has been born to you, He is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11; c.f. Matthew 1:21). The entire New Testament is unified in calling Jesus Christ the Savior of the world (John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23; Ephesians 5:23; Philippians 3:20; II Timothy 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6; II Peter 1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:18, etc). The Apostle John gave this succinct summary of the saving ministry of Jesus Christ:

“And we have seen and testified that the Father has sent His Son to be the *Savior* of the world” (I John 4:14).

After the landfall of Hurricane Katrina, we watched as Coast Guardsmen and soldiers rescued people with their helicopters, boats, Humvees and amphibious vehicles. In the aftermath of the storm, thousands of people were trapped and isolated before the rising waters, especially after the levees breached in New Orleans. Countless people were caught in attics and stranded on rooftops where there was no escape. Others were being swept away in the rising, raging waters, clinging for dear life onto floating debris until the American military came to the rescue!

Sadly, many of these people were in these desperate life-threatening situations because of their own stubborn and foolish decisions. Many had willfully disobeyed the repeated evacuation orders. Some had even scoffed about the approaching storm with words like: “I’ve ridden out other hurricanes, and I can ride this one out!” Buoyed by foolish confidence, they had refused to flee their homes before the rapidly approaching storm. So the majority of them had received plenty of advance notice, but they chose to disregard and disobey the warnings.

Like millions of other Americans, I watched the growing concern by the weather experts as they made ominous predictions about Katrina’s approach as a Category 5 hurricane. Time and again they said this was *The Big One!* Katrina was the Perfect Storm that everyone knew would one day come – inflicting unimaginable destruction to the Gulf Coast. They also knew that the death toll could be in the thousands.

And yet, in spite of those constant urgent warnings by the authorities on TV telling their people to “Evacuate Immediately,” thousands decided to stay put. They were not going to leave their homes and possessions. I watched in disbelief as so many people responded to the warnings with either casual indifference or outright scoffing! As I watched their foolish responses, I could not help but think of the words of the Bible prophesying the same attitude about the Second Coming of the Lord and the day of judgment:

“First of all, you must understand that in the last days *scoffers will come*, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this ‘coming’ He promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged

and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (II Peter 3:3-9).

How relevant those words are for the time in which we are living! These words describe perfectly the attitude that many foolish scoffers displayed in the face of the repeated Katrina warnings. And it cost many of them their lives, as well as the lives of their loved ones! It is the same dangerous attitude that many skeptics and scoffers have about the Lord’s promised return.

In reality, the Bible teaches that all of us were caught up at one time in this kind of foolish and futile thinking, with minds that were “darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in us due to the hardening of our hearts” (Ephesians 4:7-8). As a result, we ended up in the same hopeless mess that the Katrina victims who disobeyed the repeated warnings were in. Like those who survived the hurricane and floods, we too were hopelessly sinking in the toxic quagmire of sin! There was absolutely no way we could save ourselves – unless God intervened on our behalf. And intervene He did!

Just like President Bush sent in the military to “rescue the perishing,” as the old Gospel song enjoins, God sent His only begotten Son into the world two thousand years ago to be our Rescuer and Redeemer. We all know the summary of this rescue recorded in the most beloved verse in the Bible – John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

After Jesus had been resurrected and ascended to Heaven, the Apostle Peter underscored this truth of salvation through Christ alone:

“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The Apostle Paul gave this same summary in a letter to his understudy, Timothy:

“God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time” (I Timothy 2:3-6).

So my friend, the most important Stormy Lesson of all is this, “Have you been rescued from your sins by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ?” If not, I lovingly warn you that there is a certain Judgment Day coming! The Bible often refers to this awesome time of reckoning as the “day of God’s wrath” (Romans 2:5; 9; I Thessalonians 2:16; Revelation 6:16; 19:15). When God’s wrath is unleashed upon the sin, rebellion and unrighteousness of all mankind, it will be far worse than all of the tsunamis and hurricanes of history combined! There will be absolutely no

escape! There will be nowhere in this universe where we can hide from Him. There will be no safe evacuation route from the scrutiny of His perfect judgment of every individual!

The prophet Malachi expressed the severity of that day with two rhetorical questions: “Who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears?” (Malachi 3:2) The answers are obvious. No one! Every human being will either fall before Him as the Savior and Lord He has already become to them, or they will fall before Him as their final Judge. As Paul expressed it:

“At the Name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10).

So the *bad* news is there is a Judgment Day coming! At that time God will finally right all of the scales of injustice – all sin and rebellion will be eternally punished as He pours out His unmitigated wrath (Isaiah 13:13; 51:17; Amos 1:3; Zephaniah 1:5; Romans 2:5, etc). But the Good News is this: “God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thessalonians 5:9)!

With that cardinal understanding about our eternal salvation in Jesus Christ alone, let’s turn to another closely related *Stormy Lesson*...



## THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE SAINT

After every hurricane, there is always a massive cleanup that has to take place. Downed trees have to be cleared, destroyed homes and businesses have to be bulldozed, damaged houses have to be repaired, swamped cars have to be hauled away, broken power lines have to be mended, roads have to be repaved, water lines have to be reconnected, debris of all kinds has to be swept up – so life can begin again.

All of this cleanup takes a lot of time. The greater the damage, the longer it takes to get everything back to normal. There is no such thing as instant cleanup after a hurricane. The damage is too massive and widespread for a quick recovery.

This cleanup process is much like sanctification in the Christian life. While salvation is a *crisis*, sanctification is a *process*. The moment we believe in Jesus Christ, we are justified before God. That is a legal term that means that on the basis of Christ's finished work on the cross, we are declared *not guilty* before God. That's because Jesus was declared *guilty* on our behalf. He was condemned in our place.

This revolutionary spiritual transaction took place on the cross when "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (II Corinthians 5:21). That's why Paul could say with total confidence: "There is therefore now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Let me say it once again: Jesus Christ took upon Himself the condemnation we deserved and He gave us the grace and forgiveness we did not deserve! As a result, we are totally justified before God. Paul expressed this legal spiritual transaction this way:

"Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Romans 5:1-2).

Did you notice that this justification is a past tense experience? Paul says we "have been justified through faith." That means that it is a once-for-all-time, never-to-be-repeated spiritual experience. That's what salvation gives you through faith in Jesus Christ.

But while we are fully justified the moment we receive Christ, it takes a lifetime to be fully sanctified! Salvation opens the door for justification. The moment we walk through that door, the cleanup process of sanctification begins! It is the *cutting off* and *clearing away* of the lingering debris of our former pagan life: those perverted desires, worldly appetites, bad habits, and works of the flesh. The writer of Hebrews described it as the "throwing off of everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" so that we can "run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1).

This race is not a hundred-yard dash, but a lifelong cross-country marathon! Sanctification will be a lifelong process of becoming more and more like Christ. We saw earlier that God is at work in

“all things” for our sanctification so that we will be “conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Romans 8:29).

Sanctification, then, is the application of benefits and blessings of justification to every area of our lives. It is the cleanup process that begins immediately after our new birth, and continues until we see Him “face to face” (I Corinthians 13:12) and are perfectly conformed to His image (I John 3:2).

One other important point. Sanctification not only requires time – and plenty of it as we have already seen – but it also takes the right equipment and a team of like-minded people. Immediately after Katrina and Rita passed, thousands of people rushed into the disaster to help with the cleanup process. They came with the right equipment: ambulances, bull dozers, tractors, back hoes, trucks, trailers, boats, tents, chain saws, crowbars, shovels, brooms, generators, cleaning supplies – anything and everything needed to begin the long process of putting things back in order. Most importantly, they came with vital lifesaving and life-sustaining necessities like water, food, medicine and clothing.

Immediately after the disasters, thousands of volunteers rushed in to help. Doctors and nurses came, paramedics and EMT people came, power company workers came, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) people came, pastors and counselors came, governors came, the President came – all to help out and bring encouragement.

Do you see the spiritual parallel here? Right after we experience salvation, we need the right people with the right equipment to help us move forward in the sanctification process. The right people are pastors, counselors, disciplers, mentors, and encouragers who will come alongside us and patiently help us with the spiritual *cleanup* process. That’s why the Bible exhorts us to stay in Christian worship and Christian fellowship:

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

For the sanctification process to consistently take place, we must surround ourselves with spiritually minded people who can help us “grow in grace” and “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

The right people must have the right equipment for the spiritual cleanup process. The Word of God (John 17:17; Acts 20:32; Ephesians 5:26), the Spirit of God (Romans 15:16; II Thessalonians 3:13; I Peter 1:2), the people of God (Hebrews 10:25), and the sacraments of God: baptism and Holy Communion (I Corinthians 6:11; 11:23-31) are all pieces of the right equipment.

The Apostle Paul assured Timothy: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified” (I Thessalonians 4:3). Just as we receive salvation by faith (Romans 1:16-17), we also are sanctified by faith (Acts 26:18). Everything we receive in the Christian life is by *faith* alone.

Let me close this section with one of my favorite verses on the spiritual cleanup process that the Bible calls sanctification. Like me, I think you will be able to personally relate to the relevance of the progressive transformation process in your life. As you read the following verse, note how Paul contrasts their “B.C. days” as pagans with their new life in Christ:

“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you *were*. But you were *washed*, you were *sanctified*, you were *justified* in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

One of the most loved hymns of all time is *The Old Rugged Cross*. It was written by George Bernard and focuses on both the salvation and sanctification wrought by Christ on the cross. The song starts out at salvation, progresses through sanctification, and ends up in glorification. If you know it, prayerfully hum through the stanzas as you note the three phases of what Hebrews calls our “great salvation” (Hebrews 2:3).

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,  
The emblem of suffering and shame;  
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best,  
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,  
Has a wondrous attraction for me;  
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above,  
To bear it to dark Calvary.

In the old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,  
A wondrous beauty I see;  
For 'twas on that old cross, Jesus suffered and died,  
To pardon and sanctify me.

To the old rugged cross I will ever be true,  
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;  
Then He'll call me some day, to my home far away,  
Where His glory forever I'll share.

(Chorus) So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,  
Till my trophies at last I lay down;  
I will cling to the old rugged cross,  
And exchange it some day for a crown.

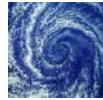
I implore you to prayerfully consider these questions regarding the *cleanup* process in your life. If you are a Christian...

- How are you coming in the sanctification process?
- Are you staying in Christian worship and fellowship so you will be encouraged and edified by the Body of Christ?
- Are you spending time in the Word of God daily so that the Spirit of God can keep the cleanup process moving forward in your life?
- Are you more conformed to the image of Christ today than you were when you first believed?

- Now that you are justified, are you continuing to be sanctified for God's glory and for the good of others?

I hope that you can answer "yes" to those questions. If so, then you are well on your way in the *cleanup* process of sanctification.

And that brings me to the next crucial *Stormy Lesson* about...



## **THE SECURITY OF THE BELIEVER**

Thousands of people lost everything through Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Year after year, decade after decade, people sadly lose everything they own through violent storms. In a few hours, everything they cherished and held dear was either totally blown away by the winds or washed away by the torrential rains and floods. The sum total of their life's possessions was forever lost.

What pieces of memorabilia they could find in the rubble after the storms subsided were soaked and soiled by the muddy waters. Wedding and family albums, videos of birthday parties, gifts, valuable artwork, jewelry, medals, trophies, CDs, iPods, computer records, DVDs, treasured books and Bibles – thousands of irreplaceable family keepsakes gone *forever*.

As I visited the disaster sites, I drove along road after road and by house after house. Outside on the streets, there were mountains of cherished family items – all reduced to twisted, torn, soggy, and mildewed garbage! My heart broke as I watched people bent over, carefully going through the rubble with their fingers, hoping to find something they recognized that could be salvaged, any memento that would keep them connected to their lives before Katrina and Rita – the notorious twisted sisters.

Once again I could see a distinct spiritual parallel. As I watched people mourn the loss of irreplaceable material possessions, I was reminded about the temporal nature of everything in this life. It is all so fragile, so fleeting, so vulnerable to flood and flame!

All of the physical and material things that we see around us seem so permanent, but in reality they are all temporary. On the other hand, the spiritual things that we cannot see are the things that are really eternal, things like relationships, love, joy, hope, peace, contentment, salvation. It is only the things of the spiritual realm that are totally storm proof. No hurricane can damage or destroy the things of God. They are as eternal and secure as He is!

That's why I observed that strong Christians went through these hurricanes with a spiritual perspective. They had already learned to hold onto physical things lightly. Their security in life was in the Lord and not in *things*. Their priority was people rather than possessions. When they lost everything, they did so with the attitude of Job when he said in the face of his great losses: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the Name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). That's the testimony of the saint who has found his total security in God alone!

Because of salvation and sanctification, the believer has a spiritual security that the world cannot give or take away. Here is the firm Biblical principle you can build upon and "bet your life on":

Those whom the Lord saves, He also sanctifies; and those whom He saves and sanctifies, He also secures!

That's the reason the Bible teaches the spiritual security of the believer. In the Book of Hebrews, our salvation is called an

- eternal salvation (Hebrews 5:11)
- eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:12)
- eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:15)
- perfect forever (Hebrews 10:14)
- eternal covenant (Hebrews 13:20)

The adjectives in each of these phrases are obvious: *eternal* and *forever*. They mean exactly what they say, *our salvation is as eternal as God is!* That's why the Bible portrays the believer as eternally secure in His relationship with God. Again, that's why Hebrew calls it "a great salvation" (Hebrews 2:3). It is great because it *eternally saves, sanctifies and secures!*

Even in the midst of the worst hurricanes, the believer is totally secure in Christ. He may lose everything materially, but he cannot lose anything spiritually. The believer may be separated from loved ones through the storms of life, but he cannot be separated from Christ. He may lose loved ones, but he cannot lose Christ, nor be lost by Him.

After Katrina, I heard a number of tearful, heart-rending stories by people who were holding the hands of a family member only to have them snatched away by the powerful currents. After the tsunami in Asia, I talked to mothers who had children snatched from their arms by the giant killer wave or by the undertow of the mighty receding current. The grief and guilt over not being able to hang on – or for letting go – was inconsolable!

But that can never happen in the believer's relationship with Christ. Jesus gave this assurance about those who believed in Him:

"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; *no one can snatch them out of My hand*. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; *no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand*. I and the Father are one" (John 10:28-30).

So, Beloved, storms, hurricanes, tsunamis and tornados may snatch our possessions, our health, our wealth, our loved ones, and even our lives from us, but they can never snatch us from Christ. He and the Father have an *eternal grip* on us and they will safely lead us through whatever storms assail our lives during our brief sojourn here on earth!

The child of God is "hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). In that place of absolute spiritual security, he has been made to "sit with Christ in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 2:6). No hurricanes can touch that place! In that exalted spiritual realm "God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way" (Ephesians 1:22-23).

All of the storm waters that threaten to go over my head are already "under His feet!" Talk about a place of refuge and security – that's it! If you have been *saved, sanctified, secured and seated* with Christ, your spiritual life is totally hurricane proof!

Please do not misinterpret what I am saying here. I am not insinuating that the true Christian will not go through the storms and hurricanes of life. I am not even suggesting that your faith in Christ will exempt you from trials and tribulations. Just the opposite is true! The moment you totally give your life to Christ, *all hell will break loose against you!* At the moment you are "rescued from the

dominion of darkness and brought into the Kingdom of the Son He loves" (Colossians 1:13), the spiritual warfare begins! The moment you *switch sides*, the evil one will unleash storms of temptations, trials and tribulations against you. His intent will be to defeat you or discourage you.

So, Beloved, get ready for the storms of life to intensify against you in direct proportion to your spiritual activity for the Kingdom of God! But, if you want to avoid such spiritual combat, then just stay in the comfort zone, settle down in the safe zone, take up residence in the place of lower/middle/upper class mediocrity.

When it comes to your faith, just *play church*, be a passive pew sitter, become a tipper rather than a tither, conform to the values of the world around you. The devil will leave you alone because you pose no threat whatsoever to his dominion in this world!

But, if you become a serious disciple rather than just a believer, if you become a serious student of His Word, if you increasingly walk by the power of His Holy Spirit, if you begin to boldly share Christ in your sphere of influence, if you become proactive in the Great Commission, if you put it all on the line for Christ – then the devil will put you in his crosshairs! That's why Jesus told people to "count the cost" before following Him (Luke 14:27). He never offered any easy believe-ism, cheap grace, or comfortable discipleship! He was straight-forward and straight-up in saying, "If anyone would come after Me, He must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23).

As you ponder the level of your commitment to Christ, please also prayerfully consider what God said to His people through the prophet Isaiah:

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze" (Isaiah 43:2).

Did you notice that God did not say "IF you pass through the waters" or "IF you pass through the rivers" or "IF you walk through the fire" No! He did not say "If," He said "When." For the believer, trials and tribulations are never a matter of IF – only WHEN!

Therefore, as you walk with the Lord through this life, you will go through deep waters, raging rivers, and hot fires! But the great news is that you are still secure because He promised, "I will be with you." Regardless of the circumstances, God said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). That, my friends, is security!

Sometimes, then, God saves us *from* the storms of life. At other times He saves us *through* the storms of life. As someone has said, "sometimes God calms the storm. Sometimes He lets the storm rage and calms His child."

In either case, He both *saves* and *secures* us! That's why the Psalmist could say, "we went through fire and water, but You brought us to a place of abundance" (Psalm 66:12). Down through the centuries, God's people have learned and experienced that His greatest "place of abundance" is across the waters, on the opposite shore of the river, or on the other side of the fire.

Certainly fire is one of man's greatest friends and most feared enemies. One of the great ironies and contradictions in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita was to watch houses on fire totally sur-

rounded by water! We watched as house after house burned, and the firemen were helpless to put the fires out. It was a strange destructive combination of fire and water.

As I watched those houses and businesses burn to the watery ground, my mind flashed back to Paul's words about the time when all of our lives will be tested by fire. He reminded his readers that all of us are constructing the houses of our lives with various building materials. One day each will be subjected to the fires of God's judgment. Note Paul's sobering words:

"By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be *revealed with fire*, and *the fire will test the quality of each man's work*. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (1 Corinthians 3:10-17).

Because our "God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29), He will bring the fires of His judgment against each of our life's work when He ushers in His Day. Please note here that it is not the Christian who is being tested by fire, only his *works*. And, the issue at stake is not the *quantity* of our works but the *quality* of our works. It will not so much be a matter of *how much*, but rather a question of *why?*

Therefore, the good works that we did for the Lord that were for His glory and the good of others – *gold, silver, precious stones* – will result in an eternal reward that can never be lost. But all of the selfish works we did for our own glory, to be seen by men, to impress people with our spirituality, as our "works of righteousness" – *wood, hay, straw* – will be burned up.

Sadly, there were many people during Katrina and Rita who were saved from the fires and water by the skin of their teeth! They got out just in the nick of time. As they fled, they could see their houses collapse in flames and go up in smoke. In a short period of time the sum total of their lives was reduced to soggy ashes! Many of them had no flood insurance or fire insurance to cover their losses.

The Bible warns us that it will be the same way for many believers on Judgment Day. While they will survive because they are eternally secure in Christ, their works will not. They will be saved but "only as one escaping through the flames."

Is your spiritual life both water and fire proof? The only spiritual insurance that can give you total security is your total faith in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus! If your life is centered in Him, absolutely nothing can defeat or destroy you!

It was because of his unshakable spiritual security in Christ that Paul could write the following comforting words of benediction:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers [hurricanes like Ka-

trina or Rita!], neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

Do you have that kind of spiritual and emotional security? Do you have mental peace of mind because you know that the really important things in your life are eternally secure in Christ? If not, you can have it because it is your spiritual birthright as a believer. It is part of the provision of God’s great salvation.

Finally, I encourage you to refocus and reprioritize your life around the things of God. Only those “unseen things” are eternal because they are based in God and His Word. Everything else is vulnerable to floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, droughts, disease and death. But God and His Word are eternal – and your only source of lasting security in this life. As Peter said:

“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God. For, ‘all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the Lord stands forever’” (I Peter 1:23-25).

With that understanding of our total security in Christ, let’s look at our next *Stormy Lesson* about...



## **THE SACRIFICE OF THE CHURCH**

Every human crisis or natural disaster becomes a great opportunity for the Church of Jesus Christ. What is often the darkest hour for the world becomes the greatest hour for Christians to shine forth with the love and compassion of Christ. Even the darkest hour of sin and corruption becomes the greatest opportunity for the Body of Christ to shine forth with the power and truth of the Gospel – even if it takes sacrifice and suffering.

One of the things that I saw afresh through the recent major hurricanes was the Body of Christ in action, just as I had seen after the Asian tsunami. Even in the buildup days before Katrina made landfall, Christians from around the country were preparing to go in just as soon as the storm passed. They were mobilizing people, gathering supplies, collecting food, water, ice and medicine, equipping tents and trailers to sleep in, and loading tractor trailers with needed resources so they could be “ready to roll” the moment the storm was over. Unquestionably, they were among the *first responders* to the crisis. Hundreds of local churches in the areas affected were the first to spring into action with whatever resources they had that the hurricane did not destroy.

As I visited the Gulf Coast Region in Mississippi where NDI is focused under the leadership of my brother, Ed, I saw over and over again the compassionate activity of the local church. All denominations were involved – Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Independents, non-denominational, Bible Churches. They were all there to do what they could. Theological differences suddenly became a secondary concern. Everyone joined hands to try and help wherever there was a need. Race, class, creed or color seemed to have been washed away with the tides and flood waters. As you watched this unity and cooperation, you knew that this is the way Christ meant His Body to operate. How sad it is that this kind of unity does not seem to linger after the crisis is over! Once the urgency of need is past, everyone seems to drift back to their own denominational and theological corners, and the individualism and isolation returns.

But immediately after the crisis, every church we drove by was a beehive of relief work – whether or not there was a church building left standing. If the church building was still usable, it was immediately turned into a homeless shelter, supply depot, feeding station, barracks for workers, and bivouac point for out-of-town work teams.

Local Christians, aided by their out-of-town brethren, were working 24/7. Many of the local Believers were doing so at great personal sacrifice because they too had lost everything – just like the people they were seeking to help. Their help and good works were not some kind of cheap Pollyanna do-good-ism. They were continuing to give out in the midst of their own pain, loss and grief.

The continued faith and generosity of many local Christians in the midst of their own suffering reminded me of what Paul wrote about the Macedonian Christians. They gave sacrificially, not out of their abundance, to help out the needy saints in Jerusalem that Paul was collecting money for:

“...now brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty

welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” (II Corinthians 8:1-4).

That’s a level of sacrificial giving that most of us American Christians know little about! But I saw that same spirit of extreme sacrificial generosity in the midst of suffering and loss demonstrated by hurricane-impacted Christians.

As I’ve said, the local Christians are usually among the very *first responders* in times of crisis. That’s because they are already on location at the grassroots level where the disaster has hit. It was their towns, their people, their churches, their schools, their hospitals, their businesses that were devastated or demolished. They obviously know the people and context better than any outsider ever could. They know where the needs are the greatest and also where the resources are the smallest.

Acting on that information, they can spring into action in a way that outsiders never could, including the State and Federal Governments. It takes time for government organizations to get into action. They are large, cumbersome and slow. FEMA is a good example. While I am not intending to criticize them or any government agencies, the reality is that they generally move slowly. They are bureaucratic by nature with a lot of rules, regulations and red tape. In order to get help from them, there is always a LOT of paper work involved. So while they have deep pockets and a lot of resources and manpower, they are not generally quick responders. They are like a giant battleship. They carry a lot of people, resources and firepower, but it takes a LOT of time and space to turn them around and get them headed in the right direction! But when they finally do get turned around and on location, they can have a great impact.

The local church, however, is like a unicycle that can turn on a dime! That’s why the church and other local faith-based ministries are generally the first responders. And, they tend to stay longer than government and outside organizations. The local church and faith-based ministries often have a time and cost efficiency unmatched by government agencies.

Let me emphasize again that the Body of Christ has a *staying power* unmatched by anyone! Long after the daily news coverage has ended, after the national focus has shifted elsewhere, after the government agencies have packed up and left town, the local church is still “on the job.” Since it is home for them, they are faithfully “staying at their posts,” meeting needs until the job is completed – even if it takes years.

So, even though the church does not have billions of dollars and unlimited material resources that government agencies have, they still have what those secular agencies do not have in times of crisis and natural disaster. Only the church can give love, compassion, sensitivity, encouragement, faith, hope – and prayer. That’s the “salt” and “light” that the world cannot give.

Most of all, Christians have the presence of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, the authority of the Word, and the fellowship of the saints to help people rebuild their lives spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically and vocationally.

While government agencies are required to be totally secular in their approach and only address the physical needs, the Body of Christ can minister the whole Gospel to the whole person – spirit,

soul and body. Therefore, they can bring a deeper healing that has an impact for both time and eternity.

Also, it is only the Body of Christ that can truly “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). Bureaucrats and secular humanitarians generally do not do that. They are not allowed to. Their very DNA as an organization requires that they remain impersonal and unattached. The people they are seeking to help are nothing more than a part of their case load, a number, a computer statistic. The people in need are nameless and faceless beings that have been reduced to a file folder!

While secular relief agencies can give food and water to people, the Christian is to clearly and distinctively do it in the Name of Christ. We want people to know why we do what we do. We are unashamed of the Name of Jesus Christ, which has increasingly become a stumbling block in America today. But regardless of the misunderstanding or persecution, we are to do our relief work in His Name and for His glory. That’s why Jesus said:

“I tell you the truth, anyone gives you a cup of water *in My Name* because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42; Mark 9:40).

Paul underscored the principle of ministry in the Name of Jesus when he wrote:

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, *do it all in the Name of the Lord Jesus*, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Colossians 3:17; c.f. I Corinthians 10:31).

Therefore, to the Body of Christ, any person you are ministering to was created in the image of God, is an object of His love and grace, and is someone for whom Christ died. These people are eternal souls who will live somewhere for all eternity and how they are ministered to during this crisis may help make the determination as to whether they ultimately go to heaven or hell. What a different perspective! It is the perspective that can make the difference between physical life and death, but also between spiritual life and death!

While the church must be broad and inclusive in her crisis ministry and disaster relief work, she has a special concern for those in need in the family of God. That’s why Paul exhorted the Christians of his day:

“While we have the opportunity, let us do good to all men, *but especially to those of the family of believers*” (Galatians 6:10).

While we seek to help anyone and everyone we can, our special focus is on the needy within the Body of Christ. That especially goes for the young and old. James, the brother of Jesus, reminds us:

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after *orphans* and *widows* in their distress” (James 1:27).

Therefore, we Christians are to especially keep our eye focused and our ear tuned to those who are the most helpless and vulnerable in our society – particularly the widows and orphans. These are the people on opposite ends of the social spectrum that are most often overlooked or put away in Old Folk’s Homes or Orphanages. But the Bible commands us to care for them in the Name of Christ.

In a world of continuous *bad* news, the Gospel is Good News. It is a message of hope that the world is literally dying to hear! In a world of growing darkness, Christians are to be the light of Christ.

Jesus came into this dark and dying world as God's incarnate light that "shined in darkness" even though "the darkness has not understood it" (John 1:4). He said of Himself: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12; 12:46). As any Bible student knows, this was one of the seven "I AMs" spoken by Christ and recorded by John through which Jesus was clearly asserting His deity.

After calling His first Disciples out of their own spiritual darkness and igniting them with His spiritual light, Jesus said to them:

"You are the light of the world...Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

Before his conversion on the Damascus Road, the Apostle Paul was living in religious darkness that he thought was light. God had to make him blind so he could eventually see! As a result, he later wrote some young Christians with this exhortation:

"You are sons of light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (I Thessalonians 5:6-8).

When Christians minister with that kind of love in a world of hate, and light in a world of darkness, it will eventually lead to sacrifice and suffering. But the Gospel message reminds us that Christ suffered for our salvation (Luke 24:26, 46; Hebrews 2:9). Also, the Holy Spirit groans along with the Christians who are suffering (Romans 8:26). Christians continue to suffer vicariously as they minister to others in the Name of Christ (Acts 5:41; Philippians 1:29; II Timothy 1:8; I Peter 2:21). This is what Paul called the "Fellowship of His suffering" (Philippians 3:10). Frankly, it is a spiritual fraternity that most American Christians don't want to belong to! The dues are too high!

But with that suffering fellowship in mind, please carefully read this testimony by the Apostle Paul:

"Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of His body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness...so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ" (Colossians 1:24-28).

Those are some of the heaviest verses in the entire New Testament and often greatly misunderstood and misinterpreted. Certainly Paul was not suggesting that there was something spiritually deficient in Christ's suffering and sacrifice on the cross. No, he consistently taught in all of his writings that it was full, perfect and complete.

What Paul was saying here was that just as Christ suffered for our salvation, he (Paul) was willing to participate in suffering for their sanctification as well. In other words, Paul was willing to go

through any degree of suffering in order to be able to one day “present everyone perfect in Christ.” And suffer he did as his letters testify to.

It was because of that level of sacrificial leadership that Paul could say to the Galatian Christians: “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Galatians 6:17). For Paul, the scars from his many persecutions and suffering for Christ were the authenticating marks of his Apostleship. Those scars were the irrefutable proof of his allegiance to Jesus Christ.

To the carnal Corinthian Christians Paul wrote: “I will gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well” (II Corinthians 12:15). So after Paul had spent all of his personal money ministering to the saints there, *he spent himself!* Not much of that kind of Christian leadership around in America today, is there?

Similarly, Paul wrote this to the saints at Thessalonica:

“We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God but *our lives as well*, because you had become so dear to us” (I Thessalonians 2:9).

Beloved, those are words that reflect the heart of authentic *servant leadership!*

So the suffering and sacrifice of the Church is one of the greatest *Stormy Lessons* that we are reminded of in the wake of ever-present natural disasters. “The fellowship of His suffering” is one of the most unique, powerful and bloody fraternities in history!

With those sobering thoughts in mind, let’s turn to our next-to-last *Stormy Lesson* about...



## **THE SHAKING OF WORLDLY SYSTEMS**

As we saw earlier in this study about the *signs of the times*, I believe the Bible teaches that we are living in the Last Days. If the Apostle Paul considered himself living in that spiritual period of time – which he did (I Timothy 4:1; II Timothy 3:1) – then you and I certainly are today.

We also noted that this highly significant phrase refers to the historical parenthesis between Christ's First and Second Coming, which has now stretched to over 2,000 years. From a spiritual perspective, Christ has tarried because of His longsuffering love, mercy and grace. He is giving as much time as possible for men to repent so they will not come under judgment. Peter expressed it this way:

“Do not forget this one thing, dear friends. With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance” (II Peter 3:8-9).

As we saw, the term *Last Days* does not mean the *end of the world*, but rather the *end of this present age*. It reminds us that a New World Order is going to one day be ushered in by God, not engineered by man. We saw that Jesus predicted precisely that there would be many signs that would be the *birth pains* leading up to the advent of that New World Order.

The coming of the Kingdom of God was one of the promises made often in the Old Testament and one of the dominant themes of the New Testament.

Therefore, in preparation for the coming of His Kingdom here on earth, God is shaking things up! He is testing foundations individually and nationally. As we saw in our preceding section, He is also going to “test by fire” the *quality – not quantity* – of every Christian's building materials.

All around us today we can see God shaking foundations, testing building materials, and trying man's kingdoms. In the process He is revealing the weaknesses and instability of man's petty kingdoms, and the power and eternity of His. Sometimes I believe that hurricanes like Katrina and Rita are His wakeup call to get our attention. They are sobering reminders that much of our life has been built on sand. It is also timely to note that many times in the Bible, God alone is revealed as the solid and secure Rock we can build our lives upon (Genesis 49:24; Deuteronomy 32:4; II Samuel 22:2; Psalm 18:2; 19:14; 61:2; 91:15; Isaiah 26:4; Matthew 16:18; I Peter 2:8, etc).

In what should be unmistakable ways, God shows us how shaky our foundations are. Things like storms, hurricanes and earthquakes are His natural means of doing that.

With that in mind, carefully read the following verses from the book of Hebrews:

“He (God) has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ The words ‘once more’ indicate the removing of what can be shaken – that is created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a

*kingdom that cannot be shaken*, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:26-28; Haggai 2:6).

We can see in this passage an obvious truth – freshly revealed through recent hurricanes – that all created things can be shaken. History records that every earthly kingdom has ultimately been shaken and destroyed. Upon their ashes other kingdoms were built, only to be eventually shaken and destroyed.

Our world is covered with the ancient dust and ashes that narrate the rise and fall of many civilizations. Each had its day in the sun. Each also experienced their “night of darkness and decay.” Those dusty ashes are the focus of study for archaeologists, anthropologists, social scientists and historians who try to figure out why each one fell. What is often such a mystery to them is clearly revealed to us in the Bible.

In case you missed it the first time, let me repeat it again, “God is shaking all things” so that “what cannot be shaken may remain.” There is only one thing that cannot be shaken, and that is the Kingdom of God. It alone is an eternal and *unshakable Kingdom* because it is the dominion of an eternal and *unshakable God!*

Daniel revealed this to Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, who was living in the delusion that his kingdom would last forever. Daniel reminded him that only God’s Kingdom “is an eternal kingdom,” and that “His dominion endures from generation to generation” (Daniel 4:2, 34). Even though it shattered Nebuchadnezzar’s political illusion, Daniel assured him:

“The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed...It will itself endure forever” (Daniel 2:44; 4:34).

Long before Daniel gave those words of prophecy about the eternity of God’s Kingdom, King David, the psalmist of Israel, sang this song about it:

“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord is the kingdom; You are exalted as Head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; You are the Ruler of all things” (I Chronicles 29: 10-12).

David proclaimed the same truth about God’s Kingdom in Psalm 103:19:

“The Lord has established His throne in heaven, and *His Kingdom rules over all.*”

Jesus began His public ministry by saying: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17), a theme He repeated often. The Kingdom of God was His central theme as revealed in the Gospel of Matthew. The only way to gain entrance into God’s Kingdom was through repentance. The word *repent* basically means a *change of mind* that results in a *change of direction* – a *new direction*, if you will!

Most importantly, we saw earlier how Jesus said that “this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

Because God's Kingdom was the central theme in Jesus' preaching and teaching, He taught His disciples to pray: "Our Father in heaven... *Your Kingdom come*, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10).

His disciple Peter later exhorted Christians to "make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the *eternal kingdom* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (II Peter 1:10-11).

But even though we Christians know that there is only one *eternal Kingdom*, which is the Kingdom of God, we still devote so much of our time, energy, effort and money to building kingdoms that will not last. We build petty and unstable earthly kingdoms that are doomed to failure.

I am always challenged by the description of Abraham in the Faith Hall of Fame recorded in Hebrews 11. It says this about him:

"By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents...for he was looking forward to a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:9-10).

The Bible reveals that God had made Abraham a very rich man in gold, silver and cattle (Genesis 13:1). He could've built any kind of *dream home* he had wanted for himself and Sarah. But regardless of how costly and splendid it might have been, he knew it would not have had a solid foundation.

By faith, he was looking forward to the *City of God* rather than the *city of man* – because it alone would have an *unshakable foundation!* It would be the only city in human history "whose architect and builder is God." So he chose to "live like a stranger" and "live in tents" until God would build His eternal and unshakable Kingdom! My friend, that's the kind of faith that honors God – and makes good earthly sense!

Since the historic city of New Orleans was almost washed off the map after the levees broke, there's been a lot of discussion about whether or not it could ever be rebuilt to its former glory, an undertaking that would cost billions of dollars. Now I know that there are significant historical places in New Orleans for our country. However, a city originally founded by pirates and brigadiers of the high seas, whose French Quarter is noted for a seedy way of life, whose most famous road is named Bourbon Street primarily because of its many bars and booze, whose greatest annual event is Mardi Gras – dedicated to every form of lust and licentiousness, whose police force is noted for graft and corruption – that kind of city may not need to be *rebuilt to her former glory!* Perhaps God was "shaking things up" to get the people's attention. Perhaps He wanted them to understand that what is glory to them is repulsive to Him!

While I have heard a lot of discussion and boasting that New Orleans would be rebuilt and restored, I have not heard anything about *repenting!* Could Jesus have once again been repeating His message: "Repent, the Kingdom of heaven is near!" through Katrina?

What about all of those multi-billion dollar floating Casinos that dominated the Gulf Coast? What about a local economy that is built upon fast money and games of chance? What about local governments who use legalized gambling to finance much of their education, politics and social welfare system? Certainly a human kingdom that is being built on that kind of foundation is shaky

at best! The gambling industry definitely fosters a lifestyle contrary to the Biblical work ethic of honesty and hard work.

However, the local and state governments, aided and abetted by the Federal Government, will come in with billions of dollars to rebuild on those *shaky foundations*. In time, God will shake them again – along with every other worldly kingdom on our planet – to make room for His eternal, unshakable Kingdom.

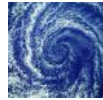
In one of the earliest books written in the New Testament, Paul wrote about that future time when the Lord Jesus and God's Kingdom would fully and finally reign:

“Then the end will come, when He hands over the Kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet...so that God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

The Apostle John had a vision of that same apocalyptic time after Christ has “destroyed all dominion, authority and power” and ushered in His eternal Kingdom:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

With that assurance echoing in our hearts, let's now turn to our final *Stormy Lesson* in this study. It is the logical climax and consummation of all we have studied up to this point. This is a lesson *after* the storm about...



## ***THE SUNRISE OF GOD'S KINGDOM***

After any big storm has passed or subsided, one of the most welcomed sights is the sunlight breaking through and dispelling the clouds. Before every storm, the dark clouds roll in and block out the sunlight. As the storm gets closer and builds in intensity, the clouds become more ominous and tempestuous. As the winds become more violent and forceful, it seems that the whole atmosphere has become angry. Everything seems to be supercharged with a growing energy that will soon be unleashed with devastating power. The heavens begin to thunder and lightning lashes out in fiery veins that pulsate with unrestrained energy and power. As the winds grow stronger and the atmosphere gets more intense, it seems that every living thing begins to look up in fearful anticipation!

The winds intensified from a Tropical Storm to a Category 1 hurricane. Fueled by warm ocean waters, the winds kept building stronger and stronger from a Category 2 to Category 3 to Category 4, and finally to Category 5 – the highest designation given to a hurricane. The eye of the hurricane grows larger and denser, and the swirling circumference of the winds become wider and more devastating in their counter-clockwise pattern. As they swirl with more intensity, they often spin off tornados that increase the damage and destruction.

Sometimes the hurricane moves quickly as it makes landfall. At other times, it seems to linger over an area like a massive hovering helicopter whose swirling blades blow down and suck up everything in its path. As the storm either dissipates or moves on, she leaves destruction, devastation and death in her wake. Hardly anything is recognizable.

But then the sun breaks through the clouds! Warming rays begin to dispel and dry up the standing water. In spite of the devastation and destruction all around, there is hope.

In the same way, the Bible assures us that after the final series of apocalyptic storms of human history that will sweep away every remnant of man's earthly kingdoms, there will be the eternal sunrise of God's Kingdom. It will be a Kingdom that will never end, a Kingdom that will never experience disappointment, disease, destruction or death. It will be an *Eternal Kingdom* that the sun will never set upon because "there will be no more night" (Revelation 21:25; 22:5).

The old order of things will have been shaken and passed away. The wildness and hostility in nature that came after God "cursed the ground" in man's place will be removed. The fear, hostility and enmity that God put into the animal kingdom after the flood will also be lifted (Genesis 9:2). God will restore all things to the way they were in Eden – that original Garden of Paradise. In the total absence of sin and rebellion, there will once again be peace between God and man, between men and women, between man and nature. It will literally be "heaven on earth!"

My friend, that is Good News that is almost too good to be true! I would not believe it myself unless I was assured of it by no less authority than God Himself through His Word. While we certainly do not know all we would like to know about this *Eternal Kingdom*, we have some very exciting glimpses of it in the Bible. Let me share several lengthy passages with you to prayerfully ponder.

- “In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it...He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Isaiah 2:2-4).
- “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:6-9).
- “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people, the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit...For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord...Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 65:17-25).
- “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea [the source of hurricanes!]. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then He said, ‘Write this down for these words are trustworthy and true.’

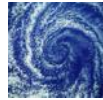
He said to me: ‘It is done, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this and I will be His God and he will be My son...

And He carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God...I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are

its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there” (Revelation 21:1-25).

Those descriptions of God’s eternal Kingdom are incomprehensible to our finite, earthbound minds! The imagery is literally *out of this world*. But they represent and reflect absolute reality. That’s why God instructed John to “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Therefore, you can *bet the farm* on them. Better yet, you can *bet your life* on them!

The splendor and majesty of this coming *heaven on earth* will be so wonderful that “The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” God’s Kingdom will literally make us forget everything of our former lives on earth. What a thought! What a positive anticipation and glorious expectation to get us through the *storms of life*!



## CONCLUSIONS

In this study we have looked in detail at 12 *Stormy Lessons* that we can learn from recent major hurricanes. These Biblical principles are sure and certain for the many other hurricanes that will come in the months and years ahead. These storms of life can become God's Bible School to prepare and equip us for His soon-coming *Eternal Kingdom*. They can become His Prep and Grad School to get us ready for His Second Coming.

Even though you may not have personally experienced one of the recent hurricanes, perhaps you are going through some *stormy times* in your life, in your marriage, in your family, in your business, in your finances, in your church, or in your ministry. It could be that some of the spiritual and emotional levees in your life have been breached and broken by the mounting pressures of life. Everything around you seems to be giving way to the storm tides that are raging against your life. As a result, you feel that you are about to be emotionally drowned in the flood waters of life!

If that's the case, I implore you to "turn to Jesus!" Allow Him to be your Rescuer and Redeemer. Don't be like those thousands of foolish people on the Gulf Coast who stubbornly tried to *ride out the storm on their own!* Don't be like those who ignored the repeated warnings to evacuate before it was too late. Don't refuse to be rescued by the Lord Jesus who so passionately loved you that He died to save you!

If you are a struggling, defeated Christian, don't continue the folly of trying to make it on your own. Don't separate yourself from the worship and fellowship of the Church. I know that every local church has problems. Perhaps the church has disappointed and disillusioned you because you don't feel that it has met your needs. Please remember that there are no perfect churches – because there are no perfect pastors or people! I would remind you of the pithy old saying: **The church is like Noah's Ark, if it were not for the storm on the outside, you couldn't stand the smell on the inside!**

So yes, there are some pungent smells on the inside of the church – and if you are a member, some of them may be coming from you! But there is also a deadly storm raging on the outside that far surpasses a Category 5 and it will take you down if you get away from the fellowship of the Body of Christ! You can't make it alone! Don't even try. Don't even think about it.

Since a kingdom is simply a realm in which a sovereign king reigns, you need to ask yourself, "Is Christ reigning in my life? Does He have sovereign rule over all of the affairs of my life? Have I fully surrendered my life to Him? Am I living under His Lordship? Am I doing all I can to 'hasten the day of His Coming' through my praying, witnessing, giving and going?"

**REMEMBER: Only Jesus Christ can storm proof your life!** Only the Ark of His love can safely carry you through the storms of life!

Let me close with a timely old Gospel song that speaks to the storms of life. It is entitled, *We Have An Anchor*, and it is a melodic summary of the principles I have shared in this study. If you

don't know it, you should. My prayer for you is that the truths of these verses will become the anchor of your soul during the storms of life!

“Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,  
When the clouds unfold their wings of strife?  
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,  
Will your anchor drift, or firm remain?”

It is safely moored, 'twill the storm withstand,  
For tis well secured by the Savior's hand;  
Though the tempest rage and the wild winds blow,  
Not an angry wave shall our bark o'er-flow.

When our eyes behold through the gathering night,  
The city of gold, our harbor bright,  
We shall anchor fast by the heavenly shore,  
With the storms all past forevermore.”

(Chorus) “We have an anchor that keeps the soul,  
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,  
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,  
Grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love!”

HALLELUJAH and AMEN!

Please visit [www.biblicalprinciplesforliving.com](http://www.biblicalprinciplesforliving.com) to listen to the *Stormy Lessons* audio sermon.