

RESPONDING TO LIFE'S DISASTERS

Philippians 4:5

Created by *Dale Obmart*

Big Idea: *We need to express God's compassion to suffering people.*

Luke 10:34 (NLT¹)

³⁴*Kneeling beside him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with medicine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him.*

Six days ago, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast with winds in excess of 140 mph and a surge of ocean water that has left the entire city of New Orleans under several feet of water. For most of the past week, our nation has shivered both with images of the devastation and with the economic shockwaves that will probably last several months to come. And we have tried to figure out how to respond to the needs of the people who were most directly affected by what is rapidly proving to be the worst natural disaster in American history.

When something like Katrina happens, you can't just plow on with your schedule without taking notice. That's why I decided yesterday around noon to postpone the theme I had originally planned for today so that we could talk and think about what we can do about this situation. The size of the tragedy is so huge...thousands are likely to be dead, hundreds of thousands of people have lost everything they owned in the world, and (in the words of Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in California) an American city is fighting for its life. The stories we hear and the images we see tug at our hearts to do something...but sitting here approximately 900 miles away from the devastation, what can we do to help?

Relief is finding its way finally into the region, but it is just the beginning. Years will pass before New Orleans and the people who once lived there will recover. They will need every ounce of help we can give them.

And that's exactly why the church exists.

You may recognize the verse I have displayed on the screen here as a portion of the story Jesus told about a Good Samaritan, who helped a stranger who had been waylaid by thieves. Jesus told that story to define and illustrate the second greatest commandment of God's law, that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. And if we are really members of His family, our identity demands that we get moving to reach out in meaningful ways to the victims of disasters like Katrina. Dr. Stan Reeder of the Church of the Nazarene in Westminster, CO has identified four specific points of action for God's people that will offer very real and very significant help.²

¹ Scriptures marked "(NLT)" are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation copyright © 1996 by [Tyndale Charitable Trust](#).
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² WHILE IT HAPPENS – by Dr. Stan Reeder. A Congregational Response for Times of Disaster, a four-part disaster relief sermon series provided FREE as a courtesy of The Christian Emergency Network. This complete sermon series, along with a four-part series entitled Before It Happens and another four-part series entitled After It Happens can be purchased in full directly from CEN at <http://www.cen-survival-kits.com/products.php?id=402>.

CARE

According to the Bible, the very first and worst natural disaster that ever took place was the Flood. **Genesis 6** starts the report by explaining that the flood came because God was sorry He had created people because they were so consistently evil.

Genesis 6:7 (NLT)

⁷*And the LORD said, "I will completely wipe out this human race that I have created...."*

Yesterday, I saw my first email suggesting that, "New Orleans got what it deserved." The message went on to describe how the city was gearing up to host a festival scheduled to begin this past Thursday called "Southern Decadence Days," and I guess the word *decadence* is meant in the most immoral sense possible. And the city has long been a focal point for occult practices, especially voodoo.

I don't know whether Katrina was a divine act of judgment or not. Is it possible...sure. And it is worth at least thinking about it. But something bothers me when I hear and read the comments of people who make these prophetic pronouncements. A lot of these statements come off with an "I told you so" kind of tone.

Rather than fall into that, I believe God wants us recognize that this disaster has changed everything for the people who have suffered through it. Maybe you have an experience of loss and devastation in your life that helps you understand. For the people of New Orleans, nothing will ever be the same.

But that isn't quite true, because there is one thing that Katrina didn't touch.

Hebrews 13:8 (NLT)

⁸*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*

Revelation 1:8 (NLT)

⁸*"I am the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end," says the Lord God. "I am the one who is, who was, and is still to come, the Almighty One."*

The message that comes repeatedly beginning with Genesis and all the way through Revelation is that when God is in our lives, nothing in this world can do us ultimate harm. Oh, we may lose a few possessions here and there – possessions, which by the way, we are eventually going to lose anyway when our lives on this earth end. But with God by our side, the only thing we have to worry about is the inconvenience of the difficulty.

It's like the first grader who was making a speech one day on the subject, *What I want to be when I grow up*. "I'm gonna be a lion tamer!" he exclaimed. "I'll just walk right into that cage with the lions roaring, their mouths open and..." he paused for a moment to think, and then he added, "and my mommy will be right there with me."

Having the right person "right there" makes all the difference in the world. That's what I'm thinking about more than anything when I look at the images of the people trying to just survive throughout the devastation. How many of them have the right person by their side? Not very many, if their behavior is any indication. Right now, the crowds feel helpless and powerless and maybe even hopeless. And they're angry. But the Lord can change all of that. He can bring hope into a helpless situation. He can bring power to the situations too big for us to handle.

Disaster changes everything...except the Lord...who changes us.

PRAYER

Prayer is the second thing we can do to offer real help to the people of New Orleans...and anybody going through a time of tragedy.

The Old Testament introduces us to a man named Nehemiah, a man who had attained a very high position in life. *Nehemiah 1:11* tells us that he served as the cupbearer to the king, a relationship that gave him daily access to the most powerful man in the most powerful government of his generation. One day, Nehemiah received a visit from some family and friends, and eventually the conversation turned to the capital of their home country.

Nehemiah 1:3-4 (NLT)

³*They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been burned."* ⁴*When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.*

Nehemiah was hundreds of miles from the situation, and completely helpless to do anything about it. But he knew who could. So he started a prayer campaign.

President Abraham Lincoln was feeling some of the same emotions when he issued a *Proclamation for a Day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer* in March of 1863. He wrote, "We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; And have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray to the God that made us!"³

The situation in New Orleans has staggering implications. Some are questioning if it is even possible for the city to be rebuilt. Even before that question is answered, our nation must find homes for the hundreds of thousands who have been displaced. Where can we find the answers and the resources for this massive need?

Disaster causes us to reach for the One who can do what we cannot.

SHARE

James 2:15-16 (NLT)

¹⁵*Suppose you see a brother or sister who needs food or clothing,* ¹⁶*and you say, "Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?*

1 John 3:17 (NLT)

¹⁷*But if anyone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help—how can God's love be in that person?*

³ Quoted in Stan Reeder's sermon, "An Esther-like Response To Disaster – Prayer." This sermon is part of the series, *While It Happens*, a congregational response for times of disaster, provided by The Christian Emergency Network. <http://www.cen-survival-kits.com/products/php?id=402>.

I wouldn't be doing my job here this morning if I didn't warn you about the consequences of this process. If you care enough to engage in genuine prayer for people who are victims of tragedy, you will very likely end up becoming part of the answer to their needs.

Remember Nehemiah, the Old Testament guy I mentioned a few moments ago? When he first started praying about the situation, nothing happened – or so it seemed. But he kept praying. Four months passed. Then, one day, the king asked him why he was so sad (**Nehemiah 2**). Nehemiah shared the situation and the king actually offered to give him everything he needed to fix the problem!

As the stories of Katrina's devastation started coming out of Louisiana and Mississippi, a long list of agencies and celebrities started hitting the media with plans to collect a lot of money and do benefit concerts to help. All I can say about that is, be careful who you try to give your money to. Most of the time, when you try to do something through some huge national entity, the actual amount of money that goes to help is fairly small. When you look at the numbers, church-based agencies transfer a much higher percentage of the money they receive to the actual need.

I believe we all should actively get involved in this situation...and stay involved with it for the time it takes to bring recovery to that area. Donating money is a good place to start, and a good, reliable place to start would be *Samaritan's Purse*, organized by Franklin Graham. You can contribute on the Internet by going to www.samaritan.org. *Prison Fellowship*, the ministry to America's prisons, is working to bring relief to the prisons in the area. That's a segment of the population that is getting absolutely NO coverage in the media. You can donate by going to www.pfm.org.

I'm wondering, though, if we should be ready to do more than just give money. Perhaps some of us should be willing to volunteer our time and efforts to actually go and help rebuild. *Samaritan's Purse* is helping to organize work crews from local churches...all it takes is five volunteers. Another thing I wonder about is if we ought to be willing to open our homes to some of the thousands of people who are being evacuated from the area. It's going to take more than the Astrodome in Houston to meet the need. I know it can be kind of scary, especially when you consider some of the behavior we've seen this past week. But I believe God is in control. Cindy and I have talked about this, and we have registered to offer our home to victims if we can be of help. If you want to do that, you can go to www.hurricanehousing.org. (I will mention that the group that organized this project is a political action committee called MoveOn.org, and they are very opposed to President Bush...I mention that just so that you will not be surprised if you click on a button that takes you to a page filled with political rhetoric. Personally, I don't endorse any of MoveOn.org's opinions, but we don't have to agree on politics in order to work together in a situation like this.)

It comes down to this...when you are living your life in the context of God's presence and power, you will be compelled to make a difference.

Disaster is an opportunity to express love in action.

PREPARE

There is one final item on our disaster to-do list. To help us understand it, let's travel back in time to look for a moment at the life of a man named Joseph. He was the one who had that "Technicolor dream coat," and the last fourteen chapters of the book of **Genesis** are devoted to the story of his life. Through an incredible series of events, Joseph became the second most powerful man in his generation.

Genesis 41:56-57 (NLT)

⁵⁶So with the severe famine everywhere in the land, Joseph opened up the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians. ⁵⁷And the people from surrounding lands also came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph because the famine was severe throughout the world.

Part of the reason Joseph was in power was because God had warned him that a famine was coming, and the wisdom to prepare for it. We don't have the type of warning Joseph had, but I'm confident that in the years to come, experts will review everything that happened in the Gulf Coast region this past week and they will use those lessons to devise a better strategy for the next time a natural disaster strikes.

But there is something more important than that, and there is no federal agency that will make sure to address it. The more important thing is the spiritual and emotional preparation of the people who will be the victims of that tragedy. If a tragedy were to strike you tomorrow, ripping away the things you treasure the most, would you be prepared? Let me explain.

Would you be prepared with a sense of God's purpose and perspective?

You may already know that Joseph was in Egypt because his brothers sold him into slavery. For a while, he served in the family of a prominent military leader, and then he was falsely accused of a crime and sent to prison. During this time, nobody would have blamed him if he became angry and bitter. A lot of people do when life doesn't go the way they plan. A lot of people end up feeling like Earnest Hemmingway, who once wrote, "Life is just a dirty trick, a short journey from nothingness to nothingness."⁴

The day finally came when Joseph's brothers – the same men who had sold him away from his home and family into slavery – came looking for food. It had been years since they had seen each other, and they had their own personal experience of "shock and awe" when Joseph revealed his identity. Stan Reeder suggests that they must have thought they were going to hear, "Go directly to jail. Do not pass GO. Do not collect \$200!"⁵ Instead, listen to what Joseph really said.

Genesis 45:5-8 (NLT)

⁵But don't be angry with yourselves that you did this to me, for God did it. He sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. ⁶These two years of famine will grow to seven, during which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God has sent me here to keep you and your families alive so that you will become a great nation. ⁸Yes, it was God who sent me here, not you! And he has made me counselor to Pharaoh—manager of his entire household and ruler over all Egypt.

Instead of become angry and bitter, Joseph tried to look at his circumstances from God's point of view...believing that God was at work. You need to have that perspective now as you wrestle with the circumstances you face. And you need to hold on to it if and when disaster strikes your life. That perspective will help you have stability and hope.

Will you be prepared with a secure relationship with God?

The only way to have that God-given perspective is to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. The greatest tragedy of Katrina is not the cost of rebuilding or the value of possessions lost. The greatest tragedy isn't even

⁴ Quoted by Stan Reeder in the sermon, "A Joseph-like Response To Disaster." This sermon is part of the series, *While It Happens*, a congregational response for times of disaster, provided by The Christian Emergency Network. <http://www.cen-survival-kits.com/products/php?id=402>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

the final number of deaths that are counted. The greatest tragedy is that it is likely many of those who died have passed into an eternity without God.

And in the end, that may serve as the catalyst for a great blessing that comes out of Katrina. On Thursday, a faith-based news website called *LifeSite* (www.lifesite.net) posted an article that quoted the president of the New Orleans City Council, Oliver Thomas, who said, “Maybe God’s going to cleanse us.”

Certainly, that’s what He wants to do. He wants every one of us to ADMIT that we are sinners who need forgiveness (**Romans 3:23**). He wants us to BELIEVE that Jesus came to bring us into His presence (**1 Peter 3:18**). He wants us to CONFESS that we have put our faith in Jesus to forgive our sins and to be the master of our lives (**1 John 1:9, Matthew 32-33**). He wants us to be BAPTIZED, buried in a watery grave where the old person is removed and we are raised as new creatures to live new lives (**Romans 6:5-7**). If you do those things, the Bible promises that you’ll be prepared for anything that could ever happen to you.

Disaster teaches us how to be ready the next time.

And if you have never taken those steps, I want to invite you to do so today. Take out your Connection Card right now (or send me an email, if you are reading this sermon online) and write the words, *Help me prepare*, at the bottom. Together, we will walk through the process that will propel you into a life filled with purpose and an eternity of blessing.