

## **FINDING COURAGE TO MEET LIFE'S CHALLENGES**

Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast of America with up to 280 km/h winds, submerging entire neighborhoods of New Orleans in as much as up to 6 metres of water. The devastation was unimaginable. Water poured over the levees, and something like 80% of the lower-lying parts of the city were under water.

Unbelievably strong winds ripped off part of the roof of the Superdome where thousands of refugees were housed in horrifying conditions. Power lines were cut, trees were ripped

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from the ground, businesses were destroyed, and cars were hurled like toys across streets covered with broken glass. So, the question is: when you're faced with something this big – this awful – how do you keep yourself from just giving up?

The New Orleans Convention Centre was opened for evacuees on 30 August 2005, but by 1 September, that facility, like the Superdome, was completely overwhelmed – so they had to declare it unsafe and unsanitary. Reports of violence, beatings, rape and murder inside the centre were widespread. Many would have seen the crowds on the evening news, but did not realise that close to 20,000 refugees were eventually in that spot. The problems that came with the storm were hard to 'wrap one's head around'. Hurricane Katrina had turned one of the world's biggest disaster relief donors into a country that had

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to in turn get help from other countries. The United States had now received offers of help valued at \$1 billion from some 100 countries and international organisations.

Kuwait offered \$500 million in crude oil and cash. Sri Lanka, a poor nation, offered \$25,000. Bangladesh, a country that knows a thing or two about hurricanes, offered technical assistance and \$1 million in cash. Venezuela offered food, drinking water and eye-care.

Canada sent emergency supplies on ships to the Gulf, and worked closely with the American Navy – and they also pledged something like 91,000 barrels of crude oil a day to help alleviate some of the problems that emerged. And frankly, these people needed all the help the world could give them. Just think about how big that storm really was:

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- Many people lost their lives – estimated in the region of 1,800.
- 233,000 square kms of land had been devastated and 80% of New Orleans was flooded.
- 160,000 homes wiped out, and a total of 1 million people forced out of their homes.
- 80% of the city of New Orleans was flooded.
- 6,000 hospital beds cut off from a major city.
- Thousands of children attending schools in other states.
- Something like 100,000 military, coast

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guards and policemen deployed to mop up the mess.

- And if the storm wasn't enough trouble, two policemen committed suicide because of the unbelievably high stress levels.

Now that's the big picture and it says nothing about the tens of thousands of other people who live elsewhere whose lives have been touched by this storm. When you try to calculate the human toll, both emotionally and spiritually, you just can't. Only God Himself knows how much this storm really cost the human race.

But we do try - in our own feeble way - to understand. And a storm like this raises a lot of important questions: Why is there so much evil in this world? Why is it that we're at the

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mercy of the elements, and the elements do so much damage? Why do innocent people suffer? And of course, where was God when all this happened?

Now of course, these questions aren't anything new. They are as old as the book of Job and they've been asked by some of the wisest people in the history of the world. The human race is desperate to find the answers to the problem of suffering, and frankly, most of the world is still searching.

And no doubt, about the toughest time to ask the questions is right when the disaster happens. Our nerves are more than a little raw when we're faced with endless days of rescue efforts, insufficient emergency funds, and the graves of loved ones to weep over. But we ask the questions anyway, because we're human beings, and we've been created to want to know.

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If you were to take a tour of the Bible, you would find that one book has a disproportionate number of these questions. And, according to most scholars, it's the oldest book in the Bible. The book of Job has over 330 questions in only 42 chapters. By comparison, the first book of the Bible, Genesis, only has 160. Matthew, the first book of the New Testament has around 180. And that's a little strange, because it seems like Jesus asked important questions every time He opened his mouth. Even the book of Psalms, with all its philosophical content and 150 chapters only has 160 questions.

So why does the ancient book of Job have more than 330? It's really quite simple. The book of Job deals with a horrible personal tragedy. It touches some of the issues that affect us all most deeply, and asks the questions we all want answers to when something like

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this happens.

Job was a righteous man. He lived a good life, minding his own business, and then suddenly his family, his home, and business were all wiped out. Two bands of raiders from Arabia and Mesopotamia came over the hill and killed his employees and his livestock. His children were killed in a freak accident when a terrible storm swept in from the desert and reduced the house to rubble.

And it all happened quickly. As far as Job was concerned, there wasn't any good reason for any of it. What did he ever do to deserve it?

You know, it kind of reminds me of what happened at the Gulf Coast. Those families had their lives wiped out by



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a violent storm, and they had no idea what to expect next? How do you start over when you've lost everything? How do you deal with losing loved ones overnight, without the chance to say good-bye?

You know, when you have problems this big, it can be very easy to lose your bearings and give up. With no shelter from the storm, despair can take over very quickly. It reminds me of a passage found in Psalm 69, where David shares some words that a lot of people here can relate to:

“Save me, O God, for the waters have threatened my life. I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold. I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me.” Psalm 69:1, 2 (NASB)

A lot of stories were revealed of the devasta-

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tion and loss of life, one of which was with the poor man CNN interviewed when he lost his wife during the storm:

They asked him, “Who was in the house with you?”

“My wife,” he said.

“Where is she now?” they asked.

“She’s gone. I held on to her hand as tight as I could. I tried, but she told me, ‘You can’t hold me and the kids ... take care of them first.’”

Imagine how hard that must have been. He had to choose between his wife and his kids. And then they asked him, “Where are you going to go?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “We have nowhere. I’m lost. That’s all I had. That’s all I had.”

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It's hard to watch that kind of story – but the truth is, we're all just one disaster away from being left completely alone in this world. Take a moment, as you reflect on this storm, and do a little personal inventory. If you suddenly lost everything, what would you have? It's an important question, because some people still had something when their houses slipped under the water. They had Jesus, and when you have Jesus, you are never alone.

Take the memories of Katrina and visit the ancient past, where we see the ruins of a magnificent city. It was the capital of the nation and a religious shrine for a very prosperous people. Before its destruction, the golden dome of its magnificent temple gleamed in the light of the noonday sun.

Long caravans meandered in and out of its market places. Everywhere you looked, you

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could see God's blessings, but the people of that city had turned their hearts against God. They became selfish and unprincipled, and that's what caused them to fall. The Bible says in Proverbs 14:34, "Righteousness exalts a nation..." but sin, selfishness and pride create a real barrier to God's ability to bless.

The city, of course, was Jerusalem, and it was destroyed by the Babylonians about 2,600 years ago. The city was ravaged by fire. In the book of Psalms, you can find a record of how these people felt when their whole world collapsed around them:

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst of it we hung our harps ... How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"  
Psalm 137:1-4

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This is an amazing Psalm. It highlights the nationwide lament of a people who knew the pain of hardship. The devastating loss of their beloved city seemed completely overwhelming to them.

Now, they didn't end up penniless and starving like a lot of people in the Gulf States, because Babylon was actually a land of plenty – but it still wasn't their home. “How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?”

Well, they refused to do it, and they hung their harps on the willow branches by the river. They made a conscious choice to stop singing. They wouldn't sing of the glories of Zion because their city lay in ruins and their loved ones were gone. They wouldn't sing of joy, because they didn't know of anything to be joyful about.

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Instead, they decided to mourn as a way of proving their nobility over circumstances. And when they made that choice, they missed out on a fantastic opportunity.

If they had chosen to remain thankful, they could have shown the world the overcoming power of gratitude. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NASB), God challenges us to be thankful, no matter what. Here's what it says:

“In everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Dr. Paul W. Brand, a noted leprosy expert who worked at the Louisiana Leper Home in Carville, Louisiana, had a frightening experience one night when he thought he had contracted leprosy.

He arrived in London one night after an ex-

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hausting transatlantic trip, and when he was getting ready for bed, he took off his shoes, pulled off his socks, and discovered that he had no feeling in his feet.

Now, if that happened to me, I wouldn't think much about it, because my feet fall asleep all the time! But Dr. Brand worked with lepers, and the numbness in his heel absolutely terrified him.

In a biography of Dr. Brand, called *Ten Fingers for God*, Dorothy Clarke Wilson writes this:

“He rose mechanically, found a pin, sat down again, and pricked the small area below his ankle. He felt no pain. He thrust the pin deeper until a speck of blood showed. Still he felt nothing. All that night the great surgeon tried to imagine his new life as a leper, an outcast,

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his medical staff's confidence in their immunity shattered by his disaster and the forced separation from his family. As night receded, he yielded to hope and in the morning, with clinical objectivity, with steady fingers he bared the skin below his ankle, jabbed in the point ... and yelled!"

Now none of us like pain, but I'm willing to bet Dr. Brand thought that was the best pain he had ever felt, and from then on, whenever he cut his finger, or twisted his ankle, or even when he suffered from mushroom poisoning, he always said, "Thank God for pain!"

The Bible says, "In EVERYTHING give thanks." Israel chose not to give thanks for their pain, and when they did that, they missed the opportunity to show the whole world that God's presence is not limited by geography, and that nothing "... will be able



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to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:39 (NASB)

Right now, the whole world is watching us. And we can choose what message to send them. Israel decided to hang up their harps, swallow their pain and hold their peace. And the world never saw God's ability to pull people through a terrible crisis like they should have.

I'm not saying we should be happy about a disaster like this. But I am saying that we can still find something to be thankful for. We can still be optimistic. And we can still cling to Jesus.

God's Son left us an example of how to 'sing in the rain' when you're suffering, and even when you're facing death. Isaiah chapter 53

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tells us that He was despised and rejected. He was abused and mistreated. Even His relatives and even closest friends misunderstood Him and made His life tough. But Jesus refused to hang up His 'harp' and give up on life.

You know, we only have one record in the New Testament of Jesus actually singing. It's found in Matthew 26:30 (NASB):

“After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”

Now in our imagination, we could say, that Jesus 'sang':

- on the night He was betrayed
- after washing the disciples' feet
- as the shadow of the cross fell unmistakably across His life

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- as one of His disciples hurried to betray Him
- at the end of the Last Supper, and
- as He headed for the agonies of the Garden of Gethsemane and a Hill of torture and death called Calvary

So, if Jesus could 'sing' in the darkest moment of His life, we have no excuse for hanging up our harps in the wake of a disaster like this. In fact, our songs will give us victory over evil.

We actually confuse the devil when we sing God's praise in the midst of suffering, and we draw closer to God, because the Bible tells us that God accepts our praise.

Never forget the words of Psalm 22, where

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the suffering of Jesus is predicted hundreds of years before His birth:

'My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest. Yet you are holy, O You who are en-throned upon the praises of Israel. In You our fathers trusted; they trusted, and You delivered them. To You they cried out and were delivered; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.'  
Psalm 22:1-5

The enemy expects us to respond and complain. He expects us to give up. But our songs of praise bring us into God's presence.

Acts chapter 16 tells a story where Paul and Silas were in jail because of their work for

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Jesus. They were beaten and jailed without being permitted to defend themselves. They suffered, but instead of  $\text{U}\grave{\text{a}}\text{ b}'\text{S}[\text{ }[\text{ } \text{Y}$ , they  $\text{sSng}$ , and the other prisoners heard them.

And then the earth shook, and the chains fell off, because praise brings deliverance.

Our lives are full of danger, and disaster, but we have to refuse to hang up our harps. God promises to be with us, especially in moments of suffering. In the book of Hebrews, He says:

“...I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.” Hebrews 13:5 (NASB)

Now that's a promise you can bank on, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name,” said Jesus, “I am there in the midst of them.” Matthew 18:20

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When we come together in pain, He is with us. When we come together to pray, He is with us. When we come together in compassion to help others get back on their feet, He is with us.

And it's not just for big natural disasters. It applies to your personal problems, too.

When a married couple kneels together beside their bed in prayer, Jesus is there. When a family bows their heads to give thanks at the dinner table, He is there. When you pray with someone who is suffering, He is there.

Want to find Jesus in the midst of your suffering? Here is the secret: get together with someone else who is a follower of Jesus for the express purpose of studying His word. Get together with someone who is a follower of Jesus and worship His name and

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sing. And He will be there, guaranteed!

In the early 70's the firemen of Fairfax County, Virginia received brand new helmets. They were really sharp, colourful, high impact plastic, size adjustable, and scuff resistant. There was only one problem with the helmets. When they were near heat, they melted, and that's not what a firefighter needs.

There are philosophies that promise to get you through a crisis, but what will happen when you get thrown in the fire? Will those philosophies help you conquer temptation? Will they comfort you when you're hurting? Will they give you strength and courage when you need it most?

I doubt it. But I know somebody who has been through death's gate and come back, and He still 'sings'. I know of somebody who has

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suffered the worst this world has to offer, and He still 'sings'. And His promise is that He can still give you something to 'sing' about. I invite you to cling to His promises even when life is full of sorrow.