



What Katrina Can Teach Us

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(Special message preached at Oak Hills Church by Max Lucado)

Who would have thought we would ever hear this phrase spoken on a radio news report in America: “Today, about 25,000 refugees were moved from the Superdome in New Orleans to the Astrodome in Houston.”

For days, we’ve watched the tragedy continue to unfold in Mississippi and Louisiana and, if you are like me, you’ve wrestled with feelings of shock and disbelief. . . feelings that, over the last five years, have become all too familiar.

We were barely into the new millennium when we saw towers falling in New York City and planes crashing into the Pentagon and the Pennsylvania farmland.

We saw bombs over Baghdad and witnessed the ancient land of Abraham become a war zone for his descendants. You’d think we had seen enough, but then came the tsunami—a roaring wave that sucked life and innocence out to sea.

And now the fruits of Katrina. A city sitting in twenty feet of water. Citizens hacking their way onto roofs and helicopters hovering over neighborhoods. Optimistic rescuers, opportunistic looters, grateful people, resentful people—we have seen it all.

And many have seen it up close. Katrina came to San Antonio in the form of 12,500 evacuees. Many of you are meeting them, feeding them, writing checks, and manning shifts. And you, as much as any, have reason to wonder. . . What is going on here? 9/11, Iraq, tsunami, Katrina. And I didn’t mention nor intend to minimize Hurricanes Dennis and Ivan and Emily.

Jesus criticized the leaders of his day for focusing on the weather and ignoring the signals: “*You find it easy enough to forecast the weather—why can’t you read the signs of the times?*” Matthew 16:2-3 (MSG).

What are we to learn from all of this? Is God sending us a message? I think so. And, I think we'd be wise to pay attention. There are some spiritual lessons that I think God would want us to learn through this tragedy. The first lesson we see is . . .

I. The Nature of Possessions: Temporary

As you've listened to evacuees and survivors, have you noticed their words? No one laments a lost plasma television or submerged SUV. No one runs through the streets yelling, "My cordless drill is missing" or "My golf clubs have washed away." If they mourn, it is for people lost. If they rejoice, it is for people found.

Could Jesus be reminding us that people matter more than possessions? In a land where we have more malls than high schools, more debt than credit, more clothes to wear than we can wear, could Christ be saying:

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15)?

We see an entire riverboat casino washed up three blocks and placed on top of a house in a neighborhood. You see demolished \$40,000 cars that will never be driven again, hidden in debris. And in the background of our minds we hear the quiet echoes of Jesus saying, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

Raging hurricanes and broken levees have a way of prying our fingers off the stuff we love. What was once most precious now means little; what we once ignored is now of eternal significance.

A friend and I attended a worship service at Antioch Baptist Church last Sunday night. Several African American Church leaders had organized an assembly to pray for the evacuees that have ended up in San Antonio. Many of them sat on the front rows . . . dressed in all the clothing they owned: t-shirts, jeans. Their faces were weary from the week. But when the music started and the worship began, they came to their feet and sang with tears in their eyes.

They were rich. Are you that rich? Were all your possession washed away, could you still worship? Would you still worship? If not, you are holding things too tightly:

"Tell those rich in this world's wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God,

who piles on all the riches we could ever manage—to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they'll build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:17-19 MSG).

Through Katrina, Christ tells us: stuff doesn't matter; people do. Understand the nature of possessions. Be equally clear on:

II. The Nature of People: Sinners and Saints

We see the most incredible servants and stories of selflessness and sacrifice. We see people of the projects rescuing their neighbors, we see civil servants risking their lives for people they've never seen. My wife Denalyn and I toured a shelter supervised by one of our neighbors here in San Antonio. We met a family of some twenty cousins and siblings. One six-year-old girl told Denalyn about the helicopter man who plucked her off a third story porch and lifted her to safety.

That child will never know who that man is. He'll never seek any applause. He saved her life. . . all in a day's work. We saw humanity at its best. And we saw humanity at its worst.

Looting. Fighting. We heard stories of rapes and robberies. Someone said, “The heavens declare the glory of God but the streets declare the sinfulness of man.” The video footage in New Orleans has confirmed the truthfulness of that quote. Can you imagine not being able to sleep in the Superdome for fear that someone might try to rape your daughter if she went to the restroom in the middle of the night?

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.

We were born with a me-first mentality. You don't have to teach your kids to argue. They don't have to be trained to demand their way. You don't have to show them how to stomp their feet and pout, it is their nature. . . indeed it is all of our nature to do so.

“All of us have strayed like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own” (Isaiah 53:6).

God's chosen word for our fallen condition has three letters- s-I-n. Sin celebrates the letter in the middle. “I”. Left to our own devices, we lead a godless, out of control life of *“...doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it” (Ephesians 2:3 MSG).*

You don't have to go to New Orleans to see the chaos. Because of sin, the husband ignores his wife, grown men seduce the young. The young proposition the old. When you do what you want and I do what I want, humanity and civility implodes.

And when the Katrinas of life blown 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. We need to be changed from the inside out. Which takes us to the third message of Katrina:

III. The Nature of God's Grace: Inside Out

Much discussion revolves around the future of New Orleans. Will the city be restored? Repaired? How long will it take? Who will pay for it? One thing is for certain: someone has to clean her up.

No one is suggesting otherwise. Everyone knows, someone has to go in a clean up the mess. That is what God offers to do with us. He comes into sin-flooded lives and washes away the old. Paul reflected on his conversion and he wrote: *"He gave us a good bath, and we came out of it new people, washed inside and out by the Holy Spirit"* (Titus 3:5). Our sins stand no chance against the fire hoses of God's grace.

But he does more than cleanse us; he rebuilds us. In the form of his Holy Spirit, God moves in and starts a complete renovation project. *"God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us."* (Ephesians 3:20 MSG).

And what we can only dream of doing with New Orleans, God has done with soul after soul, and he will do so with you, *if you let him*.

The most disturbing stories from the last week are of those who refused to be rescued. Those who spent their final hours trapped in attics and rooms regretting the choice they'd made. They could have been saved. They could have gotten out . . . but they chose to stay. Many paid a permanent price.

You don't have to pay that price. What rescuers did for people on the Gulf Coast, God will do for you. He has entered your world. He has dropped a rope into your sin-swamped life. He will rescue, you simply need to do what that little girl did, let him lift you out.

I mentioned my visit to Antioch Baptist Church last Sunday night. A local minister, Pastor L. A. Williams gave a message on this one verse: "*But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord...*" (Gen. 6:8).

The minister helped us see all the things Noah could not find because of the flood. He could not find his neighborhood. He could not find his house. He could not find the comforts of home or the people down the street--there was much he could not find. But what he could find made all the difference. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.

Noah found grace in the eyes of God. If you have everything and no grace, you have nothing. If you have nothing but grace, you have everything.

Have you found grace? If not, I urge you to do what that little girl told us she did. When the rescuer appeared on her porch, she grabbed him, closed her eyes, and held on. That's all you need to do. And if you never have, and would like to, I urge you to reach for the hand of your rescuer, Jesus Christ.

Your Redeemer lives, too. This hurricane was his tool to get your attention. Trust in Him while you still can.