

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, September 11, 2011 – 11:00 AM
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Lessons from Disasters – Matthew 16:2-3

Introduction: Today marks the 10th anniversary of the day two of America's towers fell, along with a large part of the Pentagon and killed almost 3,000 people. Who would have thought we would ever see the day in America when terrorists could use commercial airliners as bombs and slam them into buildings that symbolize our nation's financial, military, and political might?

For that matter, how many of us could have ever thought that we'd be watching via live TV, the ancient land of Abraham become a war zone as bombs fell over Bagdad just a few years earlier?

Who could have ever conceived that a hurricane could cause so much damage and flooding on the Gulf Coast, that 6 years later, the clean-up is still going on and the economic impact is still being felt?

And I haven't even mentioned the string of earthquakes, tornadoes, other hurricanes, fires, and tsunamis that continue to strike at random and leave millions dead, injured, missing, or homeless in their wake.

In the past few years, we've had the unenviable opportunity to watch unprecedented tragedies like these unfold before our very eyes on national TV and if you are like me, you've wrestled with feelings of shock, disbelief, frustration and even anger as these scenes have become all too increasingly common.

And we can't help but wonder, what is going on here? Is God trying to tell us something, or is all this just part of the cycle of life. Have we seen it all, or is there more to come?

I don't claim to know the answers to those questions, but I do know that in Jesus' day, He criticized the leaders for focusing on the weather and ignoring the signals. He told them in *"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 16:2-3 (NIV) Now in The Message translation it puts it in even clearer English. *"You find it easy enough to forecast the weather. Why can't you read the signs of the times?" (MSG).*

Actually, when we read statements like that from Jesus' own lips, maybe we do need to sit up and pay attention. Maybe God is trying to send us a message. For sure, there are some spiritual lessons that God would want us to learn through disasters and tragedies like these, and this morning, on the 10th anniversary of 9/11, I think it's important that we point them out and learn from them. For example, one lesson we need to learn is:

1. The Temporary Nature of Possessions

One of the things that breaks our hearts as we see the results of these kinds of disasters, is the material loss that people suffer. We see the pictures of trees that have fallen on cars, or houses and buildings that have been reduced to rubble, and we see people trying to pick up the pieces. But most of the time, when a person is interviewed, the thing they are truly sorrowful about is the loss of a loved one who was tragically killed or missing. And if they rejoice, it's because someone close to them was found.

Could Jesus be reminding us that people matter more than possessions? In a country where we have more malls than high schools, more debt than credit, and more clothes than we could possibly wear, could God 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 NIV)*

We see all these possessions washed away or reduced to rubble in a matter of seconds, and we're reminded of the question Jesus asked: *"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26 NIV).*

Max Lucado said that these kind of sudden disasters and tragedies *"...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 few years ago, at another church, a family whose house had burned earlier that week, show up at church the next Sunday dressed in all the clothes they owned: t-shirts & jeans. Their faces revealed the shock and sadness of

going through a terrible ordeal, but when the music started and the worship began, they sang with tears of joy in their eyes. How? Well, it wasn't because they had anything materially speaking, but it was because they knew they were rich with the joy of Christ and the care of a loving church in their hearts. Are you that rich today? If all your stuff was taken away in an instant, could you still worship? Would you still worship? If not, maybe you are holding on to your stuff too tightly.

Hear what Paul wrote in **1 Timothy 6:17-19 (NIV)**: *“Command those who are rich in this present world 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 do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”*

Do you hear Jesus reminding us through these disasters that possessions don't matter as much as people do?

Let's move on to another lesson we can learn from disasters:

2. The Two Natures of People

During the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, I remember watching the TV coverage of people who were stranded in their houses or standing on their rooftops waving their t-shirts. I remember seeing the heroics of many as they came in to help. Some were paddling house to house literally picking up people out of their homes. I saw neighbors rescuing their neighbors and offering them places to stay. I saw civil servants dangling from ropes attached to helicopters risking their lives for people they didn't even know. For them, they were just doing their job or being a Good Samaritan. So, we got to see humanity at its best.

But also during the aftermath of Katrina, we also got to see humanity at its worst as looting, and fighting, political posturing and price gouging was rampant. Someone said, *“The heavens declare the glory of God but the streets declare the sinfulness of man.”* And certainly we saw that in New Orleans.

Yes, mankind can produce people of dignity, but also people of depravity. A hurricane can blow off more than a rooftop. It can blow the mask off the nature of man. An earthquake can shake up more than a foundation of a house. It can shake the foundation of a society. Someone has said that our main problem is not Mother Nature, but human nature. Sometimes when you strip away the police barricades and blow down the fences, the real person is revealed, and it's not always a pretty sight.

In fact, man is born with a me-first mentality. Think about it... You don't have to teach your kids to be selfish or argue. They don't have to be trained to want their own way. You don't have to show them how to stomp their feet and pout, it's their nature. It's in OUR nature. **Isaiah 53:6 (NIV)** says, *“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

God's word for our fallen condition has three letters S-I-N. And in the middle of S-I-N is the letter **“I.”** Paul said in **Ephesians 2:3 (NLT)** *“... We were born with an evil nature...”* When man is left to his own devices, he is prone to lead a godless, out of control life of doing what he feels like doing, when he feels like doing it!

In fact, we don't even have to wait until a disaster strikes to see it. It's because of sin that husbands ignore their wives and grown men and women molest kids. It's because of sin that man does what he wants when he wants at the expense of what others may need.

So one thing we can learn is that when disasters hit, they can reveal the two natures of man: good and evil. And when man's deepest need is unveiled: we see that it is a need for something that is deeper than what FEMA can provide. Yes, we constantly need to look for ways to improve the system, but more importantly and urgently, we need a new nature. We need to be changed thoroughly from the inside out, and only God can do that. Which brings us to the third lesson we can learn from disasters:

3. The Thorough Nature of God's Grace

When disasters strike, a lot of the discussion revolves around the future of the area affected. Will the area or the economy be restored? How long will it take? Who will pay for it? One thing is for certain: someone has to come in and clean up the mess.

That is precisely what God offers to do with us. He comes into our lives that are flooded with sin and washes away the old. Paul reflected on this as he wrote about his relationship with Christ. He said in **Titus 3:5 (NIV)** *“He*

saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

Our sin stands no chance against the scrub brush of God’s grace. But God does more than cleanse us; He also rebuilds us. And when His Holy Spirit moves in and starts a restoration project, He does a thorough job. This is why Paul got sort of excited and carried away when he wrote in **Ephesians 3:20 (NIV)** “*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.*”

FEMA can only dream of doing a complete clean up and restoration after a disaster hits. But God does it time after time again with everyone who will let Him, and He will do so with you, if you let Him.

In fact, there is only one thing that will stop God from restoring a life that has been devastated by sin - a person who does not want to be rescued. You know, it’s sad to say but in some of the places where disasters hit, there were people who refused to be rescued. I remember especially a man by the name of Harry Truman – yes, that was his real name. Harry refused to leave the Mt. St. Helens area before it exploded. The officials pleaded with him to leave, but he refused. He could have been saved. He could have escaped, but he chose to stay, and he paid a permanent price.

You don’t have to pay that price. What rescuers do for disaster victims, God will do for you because He’s entered your world. He’s dropped a rope into your sin-devastated life. He wants to rescue and all you have to do is let Him lift you out.

Conclusion: I want to close with a verse found in **Genesis 6:8 (KJV)**: “*But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.*”

Now, there is nothing new under the sun, and I want you to know that almost everything I get comes from other sources or my own experience. And much of what I’ve shared with you comes from the writings of Max Lucado. He also wrote of hearing a message by a black preacher on this verse – Genesis 6:8. And what this preacher said was so good, I wanted to share it with you as we bring this message to a close.

After the flood, the disaster of all disasters - there were a lot of things Noah could not find. Everything was totally devastated and Noah couldn’t find any of his old friends. He couldn’t find his house. He couldn’t find any of the comforts of home he used to know. But what he could find made all the difference for Noah and his family. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. And I want you to know that when you find God’s grace, you’ve found everything you need. But if you don’t have God’s grace, you don’t have anything. You may have everything else, but without grace, you have nothing.

You know, God may be using these disasters to get our attention. Have you found God’s grace? If not, all you need to do is reach out for it. God has already thrown you a rope in His Son Jesus Christ, and you need to grab hold of Him, and let Him hold on to you. That’s all you need to do. Reach for the hand of Jesus, your Redeemer. Trust in Him while you still can.