

Katrina and Christ!

Luke 13:1-9
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I retreated home after services last Sunday to find a Category 5 hurricane, winds clocked at 175 miles per hour, bearing down on New Orleans. The doomsday scenario had the storm's eye hooking west of the city. Stronger winds and storm surge would then push the waters of the gulf and Lake Ponchartrain over flood walls and levees and bury the city in 15 to 30 feet of water. When before landfall the winds dropped to 145 miles per hour and the storm hooked east, I was relieved. I and many others thought New Orleans had escaped. Now, we know differently. The nation's greatest natural disaster in my lifetime unfolds before our eyes. A city of 500,000 sits in stench, completely uninhabitable, leaving hundreds of thousands as refugees. The underbelly of human nature has been exposed. Trust in authority erodes as people, even hospitals, suffer days without food, water, sanitation, power or rescue. We thought there was a plan; but the plan has proven abysmally inadequate for a storm everyone knew was possible. In the midst of these desperate circumstances, the most productive question is "what shall I do?" However, in moments of reflection, the #1 question is "why did this happen?"

We offer ALPHA at Bethany. This 10-week introduction to Christianity helps both believers strengthen and deepen their faith, and skeptical seekers find answers. Invariably, the first question asked in many different ways is "why do we suffer?" Why do the innocent suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? How can a loving God permit or cause human suffering? By extension, why are New Orleans and the Gulf Coast suffering? More personally, for the Bible character Job, "How can a just God strike me down?"

Some absolve God of guilt, complicity or any status in Hurricane Katrina by referring to *natural law*. They suggest global warming is the cause, and they conclude that these hurricanes are the unintended consequence of human industry. Others suggest that this warming period and hurricane activity are part of a cycle in our climate. They maintain the earth is not as fragile as humanity is. Both perspectives indict God. They either claim that God callously planted humanity in a hostile creation without proper instructions, or they maintain that we suffer the meaningless and hostile lifecycle of godless, evolutionary processes.

Some say this disaster happened by *chance*. They infer that God plays Russian roulette with the creation he lovingly designed. We are to believe that God carefully created us and then abandoned us to chance. There is no biblical support for this view. Others, who postulate chance, see all beauty, goodness and love, all majesty and humanity as a meaningless and deceptive moment of light in an eternity of darkness. Do you find that view compelling?

By far, most people trace disasters to some decree of God. They reason that if God is creator, then he, at the least, could have prevented this; and he chose not to.

Job and his four friends believed that God was actively involved in Job's misfortune. Three, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, justified God by accusing Job of sin. In the coming days you will hear some do the same with New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. They will point to one sin or another and make the link. Are they right? Elihu, Job's fourth and youngest friend, chastised Job not for some obscure sin, but for accusing God of acting unjustly. Elihu was the only character in the book of Job that God did not rebuke.

Does God do evil as Job implied? John wrote:

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5, NIV)

James declares:

God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone... Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.
(James 1:13, 16-17; NIV)

James assures us that God is just and loving in all his decisions and activities. There is no dark-side of God.

Jesus took the occasion of an atrocity involving his people, the Galileans, to teach on suffering. He did not point to *natural law* or *chance*. He asked if the dead Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans. He pressed further by asking if, when a tower collapsed in Jerusalem, the eighteen killed were the worst sinners there. He answered both times, no. Does that mean God's judgment is irrelevant? No. Jesus puts God's judgment at center. He declares, ***"I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish"*** (Luke 13:3, 5; NASU). He clarifies this statement with a parable that suggests we are just as liable for judgment, but now are extended a short grace period. All rests on our response. For Jesus there seems to be no distance between Rochester and New Orleans in the heart and justice of God. If you point to their sins, they can point to ours. There is no room for a self-righteous perspective. Instead, in this terrible tragedy, God offers us time and grace if we will receive it.

We discussed a clearer vision of Jesus' perspective August 21st in the sermon, *Realms of Authority*. That sermon focused on God's involvement. (Read it online, or obtain a copy or cassette from the church office.) The prayer of Moses in Psalm 90 further clarifies God's judgment. Moses wrote that our mortality is wrath, not blessing, and that we all live and die under this judgment. **The issue is not whether we suffer judgment; that is reality. The question is how we can escape!** Do you know when Jesus began suffering for our sins? The moment he was conceived with a mortal body!

A telling illustration unfolds in the last chapters of the book of Judges. The Israelites were executing judgment on one of their tribes. They righteously fought the warriors of Benjamin, and God confirmed their plans. However, when tens of thousands of them repeatedly fell in battle, they realized they too were being judged. As they repented and embraced an atoning sacrifice on their behalf, their judgment was removed. That is the good news of Jesus Christ. Through Christ's sacrifice God removes judgment from individuals and nations. This is the message of Jesus and his apostles. God is hungry to forgive and bless all humanity.

How then shall we Christian believers respond to the #1 question, "why?" and the most productive question, "what shall we do?" Jesus gave an explicit answer to his disciples.

"Teacher," his disciples asked him, "why was this man born blind? Was it a result of his own sins or those of his parents?" "It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "He was born blind so the power of God could be seen in him. All of us must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent me, because there is little time left before the night falls and all work comes to an end. But while I am still here in the world, I am the light of the world." (John 9:2-5, NLT)

When a distant tragedy was lifted before Jesus, he called his listeners to repent. When a person suffering misfortune was shown him, Jesus turned from warnings to acts of redemption. The power of God is to be revealed as we carry out the tasks assigned by our Father.

That is Christ's call in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Now is the time to act. Now is the time to care and serve as agents of redemption. James wrote:

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:15-17, NIV)

Katrina and Christ call us to believe and act. Katrina reminds us that we live on grace. Christ calls us to embrace that grace and share it while we have time. Now is the time to repent, pray, give and serve, so that God's power and love can be seen in world of sin and judgment.

Heavenly Father, you have not granted any of us the right to know good and evil. Our corrupted vision of right and wrong is shortsighted and results from human rebellion. Your gospel tells us that life is in the salvation and righteousness that Jesus imparts. Give us grace to identify, confess and turn from our sins as we kneel at your table. Through the gift of wine and bread, open our hearts to receive your forgiveness and your Holy Spirit that we might be pardoned from our judgment, purified from our defilement, released from our deception, and empowered in your love. Fill us with devotion for you and your Son that we might live as his partners in redemption, serving with passionate love the victims of Katrina and of the evil one whose ploys devastate us all. Grant this request in the name of Jesus, who received judgment that you might bless and restore us as your children and as your appointed and accountable rulers of earth. Amen.