

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM KATRINA\*

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**T**hank you so much and welcome to the graduation of the Katrina class of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

As we were in procession, one or two of our faculty happened to notice that I looked a little bit different than normal at this occasion. Please relax. I am starting the ceremony this way, but I will finish it in a cap and gown. We simply have to acknowledge the fact that this is not a typical graduation—that we are still under construction. It was about nine months ago that Hurricane Katrina blew ashore. After it passed the city by, the winds it created pushed water into the city, the levees broke, and 80% of the city of New Orleans was covered with water—the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States. We don't know yet all the things that it changed forever, but we do know that the lives of every one of us, as a part of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary family, were deeply affected. Those who were here on campus and studying at the time had to go through a period of unspeakable suffering. We must never minimize the fact that with all of our testimonies of God's grace—and oh, do we have them—and with all that we've experienced of the wonderful providence of God in the midst of our sorrow, nevertheless, it has been a brutal year for this seminary family. Even those who were not in the strike zone, who were a part of our extension center system, and who were a part of this graduating class, were affected by the way your classes were delivered, by the people that you took in, by the families that you helped out. Truly Southern Baptists all over this nation reached out as they never have before, to embrace the city that care forgot, and to remind us that though care may have forgotten New Orleans, God never did, and it demonstrated that in such powerful ways. We have all been affected by this unspeakable tragedy. It gives me such incredible joy to be able to say after nine months of this experience. I feel safe in saying no one can show more of the love and grace of God, and more of His winsome joy, and more of His stubborn strength than you would find in this Katrina class of New Orleans Baptist Seminary and in the whole seminary family. I am grateful for the witness that you have been to a watching world.

We would not be here today, at all, if it were not for the efforts of a very special group of people. As you noticed when you came to campus, our main buildings, here at the front, were largely unaffected by the flooding. They had no floodwater in them, although there was some wind and rain damage in many of them. We took our hardest hit in our housing. One hundred percent of our faculty homes were flooded and those families lost nearly everything they had. Forty-five percent of our students were flooded out—losing nearly everything they had. A few of the students even got flooded out although they lived on the second and third floor. I talked with one of our dorm students who came in for the October Exodus, when we had to remove anything worth saving from all campus housing.

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\*A graduation address at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary from May, 13, 2006. This was the first main campus graduation following Hurricane Katrina. Kelley walked in with the faculty and graduates wearing a construction zone hard hat and casual clothes.

He was laughing with his friends because they all lived on the first floor when they year began. The week before the storm, however, he had moved to the second floor of the dorm. He kidded his friends for their misfortune in being on the first floor and was very proud of the fact that he had moved to the second floor and put everything in the center of his room before the storm. Only later did he discover that all of the stuff he had moved was directly under a vent on the roof that got ripped off by the storm. All of it was soaked! [laughter] It is easier to laugh now, but losing our homes and our stuff was a tough hit. Indeed the mark that this year has left on our children—some positive, some negative—is something that we will always carry with us the rest of our lives.

But in the midst of all of the chaos and loss, there was a very special group of people who met together and decided that somehow, someway, they would find a way to keep you graduates on your degree plan, so that every student who wanted to continue their studies would be able to do so. Three days after the storm a group of faculty leaders and our administrative team met in Atlanta, and they made the decision that we would have December and May graduations. They determined to find a way. That first group came up with a basic plan. Ten days after the storm, we gathered the entire faculty in Fort Worth, on the campus of Southwestern Seminary. In forty-eight hours, they finished the plan to completely reinvent the curriculum and teach an entire year without a campus in ways that they had never taught before. And ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know, there is no more dedicated, professional, and passionate group—passionate in their love for Jesus and passionate in their love for students—in the world of theological education. Demonstrating the highest level of professionalism and consummate skills as teachers, this faculty did the impossible. They kept teaching! I wish you'd express your appreciation to the faculty of New Orleans Baptist Seminary.

To quote an ancient Hebrew expression: “Wow!!!” What a group! What an effort! One for the ages. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the only faculty in New Orleans among all our schools of higher education that kept teaching through the entire Katrina event. Somehow, some way, they found a way. They undertook a magnificent work because you matter to them, students; because they love you, and they love Jesus. And they were determined, if you had the discipline and focus to keep studying, they would do whatever they had to do to make it happen. And it truly has been an effort for all of us.

But we have learned many things during this year. My wife has decided the thing that she most remembers and has learned the best is the fact that whenever she evacuates for a hurricane, she's going to pack more underwear. She's announced this to our trustees and many other groups, including our donors! We've learned many things. Some of them have been quite humorous; others have been quite somber, and quite serious. We can never forget that we have been through a time of unspeakable tragedy and great heartache. But when I think about what we ought to take away from this experience, there is one thing that I hope all of you have discovered anew and afresh. It is something that God has been teaching me. All of us know that seminary is a time of testing. If it's Dr. Norman's quizzie-poos, or if it's Dr. Warren's exegetical papers, or if it's those essay questions from Dr. Lemke or Dr. Stewart, all of us know that seminary's a time of testing. But God never tests with ink and paper. He always tests with life events. And for someone who's going to spend a life in ministry, God has one question in particular that he will test us on to be sure we are ready to spend our lives proclaiming the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, and doing ministry in his name, to the lost, to the hurting, to the broken people of the world. That

question is this: “Do you believe what you know about God?” Let me ask it again. “Do you believe what you know about God?” For of everything that you can take away from an experience such as this, that is the most important thing that we all have had to decide. We know what we believe, but do we believe what we know?

It was a very dark place and the smell was extremely offensive and would have probably had us gagging, had we walked in. There was no light—unless artificial light was brought in, which was rare—it was intended to be dark. Rats and other kinds of vermin prowled around, always just out of the reach of the people who were put there. It was a very dark, a very unwholesome—and intentionally a very uncomfortable place. To make it worse, two men, before they were put in this dark and loathsome place, were beaten all over with rods—thin rods—about three feet long. Their backs covered with blood and with bruises. Their clothes were in shambles because they were stripped down and their clothes torn before they were beaten. To make sure they didn’t go anywhere, they were put in the very inner most prison, the very darkest, worst part of the prison. They were also put in stocks—their feet in stocks—set up in an uncomfortable position, so that it would be virtually impossible for them to leave or to escape or to get out of prison. It was a dark, and a loathsome, and a hopeless place, and the smell of fresh blood, and the cries of people who had been wounded and the other prisoners, the horrible food, the terrible conditions suddenly were intruded upon by a sound that had never been heard in that place before. It was the sound of hymns, of hymns being sung with great gusto and great joy. The names of the singers: Paul and Silas. The dark and loathsome place: the prison in Philippi. They’d been beaten. They’re clothes had been ripped to shreds. They’d been put in stocks. They’d been left in the darkest part of the prison. They knew not how long they would be there.

Yet they started singing at midnight—the Bible tells us. Why in the world would people in conditions like that begin singing hymns of joy? It was because they believed what they knew about God. What did they know? He is a redeemer. He has the power to take any circumstance and transform it for His glory and for the good of His children. They knew He was a redeemer. They knew that He was a holy, righteous, all-powerful God, who moved heaven and earth with a word, and that their lives were in his hands, and that whatever they were facing, He would use it to accomplish His purposes. They knew that no matter how difficult the circumstances were at the beginning of the day, at the end of the day God was going to be glorified. They just decided to start early, to start singing the hymns before they knew what God was going to do. An earthquake followed, which just may indicate just how bad their voices were, but still they sang. And in the earthquake all the doors of the prison were loosed, all the stocks flew open, and everybody was free. The jailer went to kill himself because he had to pay the penalty—under Roman law—of every prisoner that escaped. But as he was about to kill himself, Paul and Silas said, “Don’t do it, we’re all here.” Not a single prisoner left their cells or moved. I guess they were wrapped up by the concert—Dr. Gabrielse, you can hold a congregation spellbound with a concert—and when the jailer came rushing in with the prisoners looking on, Paul and Silas began talking about Jesus. And at the end of that night the jailer, his household, and who knows who else was born again and saved. God did not wait long to start the act of redemption for the blows on their backs, their shredded clothes, and their extreme discomfort. They believed what they knew about God. When they believed, they saw redemption happen before their eyes. This has been our examination question for the Katrina class.

I know as I sat on the end of a bed in a hotel room in Birmingham, Alabama, and watched on TV what all of you watched, as our whole city fell apart, descended into chaos and almost total destruction, wondering what in the world was going to happen next. What God brought to my mind was one of my favorite passages of Scripture. It was the first passage of Scripture that I read when our administrative team and faculty leaders gathered three days after the storm—Psalm 46:

*God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help  
in trouble.  
Therefore, we will not fear,  
even though the mountains are shaking,  
even though the sea is roaring.  
There is a city, the stream of God,  
makes glad the City of God,  
and God is in the midst of her;  
God will help her, and that, right early.  
The Kingdoms shook;  
the heathen raged, but God just uttered his voice,  
and the earth melted.  
The Lord of Hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

*Come behold the works of the Lord,  
what desolations he has wrought in the earth.  
He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth.  
He breaks the bow in two. He cuts the spear in half;  
he burns the chariots of war with fire.  
Be still, and know that I am God,  
I will be exalted in the earth,  
I will be exalted among the nations.  
The Lord of Hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

My precious students, do not ever lose hold of the Godness of God. Know that whatever you are facing—whether rough, or hard, or dangerous—understand that God is always good and, that there's never a moment when things are out of His control. There is never a microsecond when he steps away from full attention to your life and circumstances. He is always with you. When you pass through the waters, he will be with you; and through the flood, it will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, nor will the flame scorch you [Isaiah 43:1-2]. He is God. What difference does it make? It makes all the difference in the world when you know the end of the story.

When I was in college a friend and I were going to have to travel almost all the way across Texas and we could not leave until late in the afternoon or early evening. All afternoon, I was cleaning up my apartment, packing up, and getting ready. While I was packing and cleaning, I had the television on. I watched one of those football games where

one of the teams got very far ahead and then ended up losing at the last second. I turned off the TV at the end of the game, and five minutes later my friend arrived. We loaded the car and off we went. He was driving first, and we agreed that the driver got to choose the radio station. As he fiddled around the radio—he liked football and he knew I liked football—we came to this football game. As we were listening I quickly realized it was the game I'd been listening to that afternoon. Apparently they had taped the game and just announced at the beginning, "This is a tape delay broadcast," pushed the button, and then let it roll without another word about it having been played earlier in the day. So we're driving along, and my friend didn't know it was a tape delay broadcast. He started talking about what a rotten team this was who was being beaten so badly, how sorry they were, and what a bunch of wimps, and so on.

After a while—when he just went on and on—I finally said, "You know, I believe in those guys." [laughter] "I believe they have what it takes. I believe they can do it. And you give this coach a half-time, you'll be amazed at what he can do."

He said, "There's no way. They're going to get creamed."

I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I know in a while, we'll have to stop and get gas and food, and I'll make a deal with you. If your team wins, I will buy the gas and food. If my team wins, you buy the gas and food."

He said, "But Chuck, that isn't fair. They're too far ahead."

I said, "I know it isn't fair. But I'm willing to take a chance if you are."

He said, "Okay."

Well, they scored once before halftime. They came back after the half and it was a completely different game. They got closer and closer and closer. Finally they scored a touchdown to put them within five points of the lead, but there were only thirty or forty seconds left in the game. My friend said, "Well, I'll give this to you, at least they made it a game. At least they fought hard."

I said, "Oh, it's not over yet."

He said, "Man, if they were to win this, first of all, they'd have to cover an on-side kick. Do you know what the odds are against them being able to do that?"

I said, "These guys are good. I really believe these guys are good."

He said, "Well, even if they got the on-side kick, they'd only have time for one play. The whole defense would be line up on the goal line. There's no way!"

I said, "Way!"

They covered the on-side kick. Ten seconds left in the game: Forty-five yards away from the goal line. The whole defense, almost, lined up on the goal line to stop any touchdown effort. The quarterback goes back to pass. Finally, a couple of defensive linemen get through and start to tackle him. He is falling to the ground. He throws the ball as far as he can. He can't even see where he's throwing the ball. A whole pack of people are down there. And suddenly, out of the pack, one guy jumps, catches the ball about one inch off the ground, pulls it in as he falls to the ground in the end zone, scoring the touchdown and winning the game.

My friend sat in stunned silence for a moment. And I let him enjoy it. I was a bad boy. Finally, he said, “Man, you really did have faith.”

I have often thought about that time, and it finally dawned on me. He was right. More right than I realized at the time. Faith isn't what we hope or wish will happen. Faith is what we know God is going to do. And we have learned, in the service of Jesus, you may not always be safe. Your service of Christ may lead you into harm's way. You may be at your most devout, but bad things, heart-wrenching things, can happen. Yet still you are never out of his grip. And in his grip, though trials may come and difficulties may pile up, so will the redeeming power of God. At the end of the day, we will always be singing, “It is well with my soul.”

I leave you with the words of a black preacher that I've remembered ever since I heard Tom Elliff tell the story of him trying to explain to a young man that as long as he had given his life to Jesus, he could stop worrying. He was secure forever with God. The preacher said, “If the devil ever came after my soul, first of all, he'd have to pry open the fingers of my heavenly Father that are holding me close to His heart. If he managed to do that, the devil would then have to wade through the blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross for the forgiveness of my sin. If he managed to do that he would then have to try to crack open the seal of the Holy Spirit, protecting my soul forever. And by the time that Devil did all that, he'd be one saved Devil.

Do you believe what you know? That's the test question. At the foot of the cross, where God himself experienced unspeakable suffering for the forgiveness of our sin, He finished it with resurrection from the dead. We stand as a testimony to New Orleans and to this world. We know we belong to Jesus. It may get rough, and it may get very hard, and the tears may flow, but we are never out of the grip of God. In that grip the last chapter of our story will always be the joy of his grace proving to be sufficient for our need.

God bless you. And congratulations Katrina class, for a job well done.