



Lake Wales
Church of Christ
463 N. Buck Moore Rd.
Lake Wales, FL 33898
www.lakewalescoc.com
(863) 676-4114

VOL. XXIX
NO. 12
March 23, 2014

Tower of Strength

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”

—Proverbs 18:10

Disasters: What They Can and Can't Do

C. S. Lewis says in *The Problem of Pain*, “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Sometimes I spend a lot of time talking to someone about their soul, or encouraging them to open a Bible and read the gospel message, but they just can't be bothered. And I think to myself, it's going to take a disaster to really get that person's attention, to blast through the crust around his heart, to shake him out of spiritual lethargy.

Maybe that's why God provides disasters from time to time. The disaster might be directly related to one's sinful behavior, reaping what he has sown. A drunk may finally drive his car into a telephone pole and see his own blood on the hospital sheets—or worse, injure someone else—which forces him to seriously reconsider the outcome of his actions. A pot smoker may fail a surprise random drug test and suddenly find himself coming home to a hungry family without a paycheck, thus hitting one of those

many hard ledges on the fall toward rock bottom, which forces him to decide whether or not this is really the direction in which he wants his life to continue. A liar may finally get caught in a lie, and suffer humiliation. Such emotional pains are as sharp as physical pains. Bitter consequences can be powerful enough to get a person to repent and change. Sometimes I believe God allows or even causes these things to happen, because “those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (Heb. 12:6).

The disaster might be totally unrelated to one’s behavior. Now, it is important take a moment here and remember that in God’s present arrangement for the world, not every sinful act receives an immediate lightning bolt out of the blue, and not every faithful person enjoys a charmed life (Job 12:6, or Psalm 73:1–14 for examples). I’ve known plenty of wicked men who experienced decades of carefree health and hedonism, and I’ve known plenty of righteous men who experienced decades of sickness and misfortune. Sometimes, bad things just happen. Nevertheless, when these disasters come about in the course of human events—maybe a random car accident, a diagnosis of some serious genetic disease, or a heart attack—they can cause a person to reevaluate his life. In Amos 4, for example, the Lord sent a drought to get the attention of the children of Israel, to turn them back to the Lord. The death of friend or a family member can sometimes remind a person of that fact which we tend to ignore, that life is short, and soon we will all stand before God (Ecc. 7:2). Of course, the loss of a loved one will sometimes cause a person to become very bitter and blame God; but that is a subject for a different bulletin.

Sometimes the disaster doesn’t have to be personal to strike us intimately. Remember how in the aftermath of 9/11, church attendance went way up, as many Americans did a gut check and felt the desire to find direction and meaning? It reminds me of that classic John Donne line, “never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” As often as we see sorrow and pain in the world, we have a God-given opportunity to look for a better place, a heavenly place.

What a Disaster Cannot Do

While I believe God has a purpose for pain, we must all understand that there is only so much that a dramatic event can do toward one's spiritual growth. It can shake him up and wake him up. It can make him slow down, have another look at things, reorganize his priorities, and turn toward God. But a disaster cannot save him. Unless a person bases his new interest on God's word and promises, it will be temporary and shallow.

In Luke 16, Jesus recounts the events in the lives of an unnamed rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. Both die. Lazarus' joyful experiences begin immediately, for he "is carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom." Meanwhile, the rich man finds himself having been dumped and abandoned to the torments of Hades. He soon has an underworld conversation across the fixed chasm with Abraham, who informs him that his situation is irreparable, unchangeable, and eternal. There will be no relief, there will be no end to his flaming agony, not even a thimbleful of water to cool his tongue. So the rich man made another request of Abraham:

"Then I beg you, father, that you send [Lazarus] to my father's house—for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."

But he said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!"

But he said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead."

Certainly Jesus is making an oblique reference to His upcoming resurrection; but regardless, seeing a person rise from the dead and deliver a message from beyond the grave would get the attention of even the most hard-hearted cynic. Just think—if one of my deceased

relatives appeared at the foot of my bed one morning, and said, “Change your ways... You do not want to experience Hell...” I would be shaken to the very core!

And yet, this passage tells us such an encounter would not be enough to get me to turn my life around. I would quickly rationalize it, forget it, or file it away to be acted upon later. The most convincing source of information is God’s word. If I will not be persuaded by the Bible, I will not be persuaded even if God scares me with a ghost, shakes me with bad news, or shatters my comforts with a crisis.

The only force with the power to truly save is the gospel message (Rom. 1:16–17). Let us not make that common mistake in thinking that anything replaces the gospel—not a new interest in charity, not hugging one’s kids for the first time in years, not switching to patriotic country music, and certainly not “going to church.” Those may all be lovely things, but they aren’t the same as gaining salvation in Christ.

Remember that when the soon-to-be apostle Paul was marching toward Damascus, the light that shown around him blinded him for three days—an earthshattering encounter if I’ve ever heard of one—but he was not thereby saved! The voice from heaven said, “get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do” (Acts 9:6). Paul entered Damascus, and found a Christian named Ananias, who told him the gospel, and laid before him God’s commandment: “Now why do you delay? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16). God sent a dramatic moment which stopped Paul in his tracks and made him reconsider the evidence about the man Jesus—but until Paul made the commitment to live as a Christian, the process wasn’t complete.

So let troubling times have their intended result—not just a temporary jolt—but to cause us to listen to the message of Christ, and store up treasures in heaven, where “neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt. 6:20). —*John Guzzetta*

Quote of the Week:

“You will carry out God’s purpose however you act, but it makes a difference to you whether you act like Judas or like John.”—*C. S. Lewis*