



God in the Storm: Finding Peace in Suffering

by Vicar Paul Hemenway

Leader Guide

This brief, downloadable Bible study is in an easy-to-use, discussion-based format. Primary Bible verses relating to the topic are included, but you may want to have Bibles handy for study participants.

Before the session begins, familiarize yourself with this study. Pay special attention to the three Bible verses printed in the section entitled “Unchanging Word.” Consult the Concordia Self-Study Bible or other reputable commentaries for notes on these passages.

Make one copy of this study for each Bible-study participant. Divide larger groups into smaller groups of no more than eight people. You may choose to do this for the “Changed Lives” section. Smaller groups will encourage a greater number of participants to reflect and respond to questions and will make the study more enjoyable and memorable for both them and you.

In addition to Scripture, we recommend reviewing the following resources:

- Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms (The Creed: Explanation to the First Article; the Explanations to The Lord’s Prayer);
- Augsburg Confession and Apology (Articles I–V, XVII–XX).

Changing Currents

Annually, our planet suffers horrible and deadly disasters: hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, mudslides, and tornadoes. In 2005, worldwide deaths due to the effects of nature approached 500,000 people. In October of that year, an earthquake on the India-Pakistan border resulted in the perhaps as many as 100,000 deaths. In addition, every day thousands of people die from starvation as a result of drought. The death toll keeps climbing, and it seems human suffering will never end.

The aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita will be felt for years to come in the United States. New Orleans, one of America’s oldest and most famous metropolitan areas, seems far removed from total recovery. The devastation experienced by many in Mississippi, an event some feel largely ignored by the national news media, is just now being understood. People in the areas hardest hit lost literally everything—with the exception of their own bodily life.

During times like these many turn to God to ask for His help. Others find their faith weakened by catastrophic events. Still others lose their faith entirely. Some, however, seek to find answers to why these tragedies occur. So what is going on? Why *do* these things happen? Does God allow them to happen? Does He even care? And if He does love us like the Bible says He does, then why does He allow such horrific human suffering? This study will take a brief look at three passages in Scripture that deal with these questions.

1. What are some of the comments you hear in the aftermath of disasters or tragedies? What do your Christian friends say? What do your non-Christian friends say?

2. How do you think the media treat events such as natural disasters, tragedies, and human suffering? Does their presentation affect your opinion about these events?

3. When a disaster the size of Hurricane Katrina occurs, it often consumes media attention for a time and then slips out of view. How can this affect those having real, urgent, and continuing needs?

Unchanging Word

Unless you repent

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, some Christians inferred that God had singled out New Orleans for punishment because so much of the city is “sinful.” Due to its toleration of drunkenness, sexual misconduct, and religious practices that are contrary to the teaching of Scripture, these people say New Orleans and its residents “had it coming.” Read Luke 13:1–5.

There were some present at that very time who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And He answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

1. In response to the opinion that New Orleans “had it coming,” other Christians asked why Las Vegas or any other city known for its vices didn’t suffer a similar disaster. Before a righteous and holy God, can anyone claim purity or innocence (see Romans 3:23)?

2. While God executes judgment on cities and nations when and where He wills (see Genesis 19:24–25), Jesus’ words above make it clear that human suffering is *not always* the direct result of the victim’s intentional sin (see also Job 1:8; 2:3). Why is that important to remember?

3. Jesus describes heartfelt repentance as everyone’s proper response to tragedies of any description. How else are Christians to respond on behalf of others during their times of suffering (Galatians 6:10; 1 John 4:7–9)? What enables us to do so (1 John 4:19)?

4. When people ask, “Why has this happened?” what might be an appropriate response? How does Jesus’ power over wind and wave demonstrate that, even in the midst of our darkest fears, He still has everything under His gracious control (see Mark 4:35–41; Psalm 23:4)?

God Is Our Refuge

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis describes a typical human attitude about God. His human creatures reason that if God were truly good, He would make them happy. And if God were all-powerful, then He would be able to do everything He wanted. However, because human beings are not happy, either God isn’t truly good or He is powerless. Or both! Lewis concludes that this is human pain in its simplest form. Read Psalm 46:1–3, 8–11.

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.*

*Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how He has brought desolations on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
He burns the chariots with fire.
“Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!”
The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

1. Psalm 46 confesses a confident faith in a gracious, loving God who is with us and for us—even in the midst of horrifying natural occurrences. What do verses 1–3 describe? How might this apply to the kinds of disasters we witness today?

2. Like Lewis' "problem" of pain, this psalm evokes both God's almighty power and His abundant mercy. Why should we believe in both His power and mercy, without trying to reconcile them with mere human reasoning (see Romans 11:33–36)?

3. Even in the midst of devastation, when it *seems* that there is no help to be found, what does this passage tell us? What calamities does Paul mention in describing the depth and breadth of God's love for us in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:35–39)?

4. This psalm inspired Martin Luther to write the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." In stanza 3, Luther identifies Jesus with "the Lord of hosts" (*LW* 297:2). How does Christ's gracious presence in the Gospel and the Sacraments comfort you in troubling circumstances?

We have peace with God

In the wake of devastation people often ask, Why doesn't God do something? They really seem to be asking, Why doesn't God do something to get us out of this mess? Actually, God *has* gotten us out of the worst "mess" of all—sin. God's reasoning behind allowing specific areas of our nation and world to suffer devastation and loss remains beyond our capabilities to understand; however, we *do* know that our heavenly Father loves us very much and that He has displayed that love fully on Christ's cross. Read Romans 5:1–5, 9–11.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God. For if, while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

1. Ultimately, disasters are the result of a problem much bigger than realignment of tectonic plates, changing weather patterns, or holes in the ozone layer. They are a result of a world infected by sin. According to this passage, what has God done to reconcile us to Himself?

2. When disaster strikes, some feel that God is displaying His righteous anger or wrath personally toward them. On whom has God poured out His unmitigated wrath (v. 9)? What is the result for us (v. 10)? How does this affect our attitude and our actions (v. 11)?

3. A sign seen in the front yard of a home destroyed by Katrina read: "We are not what we own." Why should we not let the material things of this world determine our self worth—or our happiness? In Christ, what do we possess that is far more valuable than any material possession?

4. When Paul says we "rejoice in our sufferings," he does not mean that we rejoice *because of* our sufferings, but *in* our sufferings. Why is this difference important? What powerful spiritual gift does Jesus give every believer (John 14:27)?

Changed Lives

Holy comfort

Natural disasters and human suffering are horrible; however, as believers we know that we are reconciled to God through His Son, and that He has *everything* under His gracious control. In faith, we look at these events believing that God will work everything to our good (Romans 8:28). Disasters provide us with an opportunity to repent of our sins, to trust in God's gracious Word in Christ, and to do good works for our neighbor.

1. When others come to us in times of despair and hopelessness, what does God's comfort to us in Christ encourage us to do (2 Corinthians 1:3–7)? What does Jesus promise all who look to Him in faith during their times of mourning (Matthew 5:4)?

2. God works through the efforts of the National Guard, the Federal Emergency Management Authority (FEMA), and other agencies to provide assistance to those in need. What is the Christian response to governmental authorities providing services to others (see Romans 13:1, 6–7)?

Sufficient grace

1. Paul experienced many hardships for the Christian faith: rejection, exile, prison, torture, and ultimately death by the sword. God also gave him an affliction to keep him humble (see 2 Corinthians 12:7–10). What was the Lord's profound statement regarding Paul's suffering?

2. Paul understood that wrapped up in the word *grace* was God's presence, love, and forgiveness in Christ, and a promise of an eternity spent with Him. That same grace is there for *us* too. How does God's grace in Christ affect how we think, feel, and act (see Philippians 4:4–9)?

Idea Exchange

- Web: *Katrina's Impact, Synod's Response*, by Matthew Harrison, *The Lutheran Witness*, available at www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/Lutheran%20Witness/Witness%20Oct05.pdf
- Web: *Dealing with Disaster: What is a Christian to make of the tragedy?* by James Heine, *Reporter Online*, available at www.lcms.org. Click on "News," then go to the *Reporter's* archives for November 2005.
- Bible Study: *Job: Compassion in Calamity*, by Dirk van der Linde, God's Word for Today adult Bible study series (Concordia Publishing House, 2005).

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