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BEYOND THE STORM

How to Thrive in Life's Toughest Seasons
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Introduction

The Storm Playbook

I once asked a psych nurse, “What is the difference between someone who loses their mind and goes crazy during a difficult experience and someone who has a similar experience but can go on with their life?”

Her answer was unbelievably simple: “Coping skills.”

Those two little words pack a powerful punch. No matter what kind of family you come from, no matter your educational background or your socioeconomic status, if you live in this world long enough, you will eventually face something that will rock your world, a life “storm.”

One of the most difficult examples I can think of is losing someone you love. Afterward, friends and family will gather
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around, bring comforting meals, and offer emotional support. However, soon after the funeral is over, after the casket is lowered into the ground and everyone returns to their lives, you are left alone to pick up the pieces and try to figure out how to walk in your new “normal.”

Your personal strategies and selected coping mechanisms all play an enormous role in how you adjust to life after loss, tragedy, or trauma. I know firsthand what it feels like to put the pieces of your life back together after a devastating loss. This book, simply stated, is a playbook to give you an arsenal of coping skills. It is designed to help you process difficult situations and assist you with surviving those challenges by outlining relevant, practical steps you can implement in your daily life to push forward through setbacks and agonizing circumstances. As you begin to use the techniques and strategies illustrated in these chapters, I hope you will be able to come into alignment with God’s purpose for your life, renew your hope, reclaim your passion for life, and experience fulfillment and joy. Many books have already been written about life after tragedy, but I want to provide clear-cut strategies for surviving, recovering, and thriving after tragedies, traumas, and trials.

I have discovered, through my experiences, that there is a difference between surviving and thriving. Survival is good, but thriving is better. To survive is to continue to live or exist in spite of danger or hardship. In many cases, though, people exist but don’t really live life after extreme situations happen to them. On the other hand, to thrive is to grow or develop well; to prosper or flourish. It is God’s desire that we do not merely exist after storms but grow, develop, and flourish in every way! The instructions, strategies, and examples given in this playbook are
designed to help you do just that. No matter what kind of challenge you face, *thrive*.

There are many different types of losses and challenges we can experience, but I have learned that afflictions and difficulties ultimately fall into these main categories:

- **Expected**, such as the prolonged illness of a loved one
- **Unexpected**, such as a fatal car accident
- **Avoidable**, such as a tragedy/loss that was preventable (for example, a house fire caused by faulty wiring)
- **Unavoidable**, such as a tragedy or loss that could not be prevented (for example, a parent with a genetic disease)

I emphasize the plurality and diversity of losses and challenges because while it is difficult to recover from one hurt, it can seem impossible to get over two or three facing you all at one time. However, I am a living witness that it is absolutely possible.

I have discovered that one way to ensure that you can adjust appropriately and continue to live an emotionally healthy life through crisis is by learning how to distinguish between helpful and harmful coping strategies and then implementing the helpful ones while avoiding the harmful ones.

As you can see from the list below, there are many types of beneficial coping mechanisms, including:

- **Adaptive mechanisms**: those that offer definite help
- **Behavioral mechanisms**: those that change what we do
- **Cognitive mechanisms**: those that change what we think
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- **Conversion mechanisms**: those that change one thing into another

Psychologists have also identified negative coping strategies that can be a hindrance to healing. These may be more harmful than helpful and can make the situation worse rather than better. They include:

- **Attack mechanisms**: those that push personal discomfort onto others
- **Avoidance mechanisms**: those that avoid the issue
- **Defense mechanisms**: those you use to defend yourself. There are many of them, but two of the most common are displacement and projection.
- **Self-harm mechanisms**: those that hurt us when we use them

We will discuss these in greater depth in chapters 5 and 7 so that you can be aware of and avoid the negative coping strategies while embracing the positive ones, making them a part of your very own Storm Playbook.

It is crucial for you to learn about these techniques because when life gets rough, it doesn’t matter who you are, it hurts. My husband and I are pastors, and we have been very successful in ministry, but when Hurricane Katrina hit us in 2005, it was a tough, challenging, and painful time. That experience, along with several others, has given me some practical keys that I believe will assist you in recovering from whatever life is throwing your way.
How to Use This Book

This book has several sections to assist you in applying the information to your life. First, I want to encourage you to get a small journal or notebook and take notes during your journey. Use this writing time to identify and address the overwhelming situations that are sucking all the joy from your life. I have been there and lived through it, and you can too, but you must be intentional and take time to process the event that is taking such an emotional, physical, mental, and/or sociological toll on you. You can do that by using this playbook to unlock buried or forgotten truths or issues regarding your storm, including

- identifying the source of your pain;
- creating a clear plan to move forward;
- developing your plan step-by-step; and
- knowing and deciding the parts you must “own” alone, as well as the areas where you may require assistance from others.

Besides being an interactive tool to help you actively assess and overcome your hurts and difficulties, Beyond the Storm will help you change how you see the storms in your life. In order to do this effectively, there are “Storm Studies” at the end of each chapter that include chapter summaries, journaling questions, Scripture studies of storm survivors, and memory verses. Some of the chapters have a few alternate sections, but rest assured, they are all designed to help you make the most out of your time with this book. Although life is hectic and busy, I believe taking the time to complete these activities is well worth it. It will not
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only help you navigate the effects of your past and prepare for future storms, but will also teach you how to look beyond your storms so you can actively pursue the purpose you were designed to fulfill.
CHAPTER 1

Life Before the Storm
Before we venture into the storm, I want to share a little more about me. I’m a native of New Orleans. It’s where I graduated from high school, and I had planned to go to UCLA to major in communications. My dad, however, insisted that school was too far away. I was agitated at his disapproval, but I conceded and decided to enroll at the University of New Orleans. That fall, when I was about to begin my college classes, my husband-to-be, a young man all the way from Canada, started attending my church. Weeks after joining our church, on a November morning around Thanksgiving, he shared the testimony of what God had done in his life and how he ended up in our city. In a nutshell, he had lost everything and felt as if God was specifically saying, “Get to New Orleans.”

Like Jonah in the Bible, this young man was hesitant to follow the leading of the Lord. He thought, *I don’t even know anybody in New Orleans.* But he realized that trying to rebel wasn’t working. After all, someone had stolen his car with all his clothes and other belongings in it. He stated how extremely painful that was, because he had very little money to replace the things he had lost. He admitted that it shook his faith. So he stopped resisting and said, “Lord, I’m going.” He took a Greyhound bus and made his way to New Orleans.

It seemed logical then that after relocating to New Orleans
he would start attending the church nearest his new home, which was my church. He decided to become a member there. We know now it was divine destiny.

The older people were impressed with his testimony. All the older ladies were chattering, “He’s such a fiery young man.” Later, when I got home, even my granny said, “Oh, wasn’t that a powerful testimony?” I smiled at her, but I laughed to myself, because I was busy in college and not interested in having a boyfriend.

Time passed, and about a month later, I sang a song at our preservice, where we held discipleship training. I had a huge Afro—keep in mind, it was the seventies—and when the service was over, that same young man came up to me and said, “That was a beautiful song. By the way, the Lord said you’re going to be my wife.” I was so taken aback that I started avoiding him anytime he was around. But he kept pursuing me, and eventually we became friends and started dating. After two years, he asked me to marry him.

That man, Paul S. Morton, turned out to be a phenomenal husband of forty-one years, a remarkable pastor, a wonderful singer, an exceptional preacher, and an excellent father. From that union, we had three children—two girls and a boy. We have had highs and lows, but all in all, we have created a great life in our many years together. People always asks us our secret to staying together for so long. We say God is the third person in our marriage. He makes the difference.

When we were first married I did not work in ministry, but we have now celebrated over thirty years serving together, twenty-five of those years as pastor and co-pastor of Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church in its three locations. We are grateful
that while ministry is time consuming, we were able to build and enjoy a wonderful personal life with each other, our children, extended family, and friends. All this was life before the storm, Hurricane Katrina. Amazingly, after the storm we organized a new church, Changing a Generation Full Gospel Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and have been co-laborers in its growth for twelve years.

A year before Katrina, I also assisted my husband with another church he had planted in Arabi, Louisiana. It, too, was called Changing a Generation. A pastor was installed there but later was led to relocate. At that time, we already had seven weekly services among our three locations. As his co-pastor, I thought eight services would overload my husband and pastor, so I felt the need to step up and offer to lead the church in Arabi until another pastor was found. Within months my husband was led to install me as the senior pastor. It was scary and challenging, but also intriguing. Unfortunately, before a year had passed, Katrina hit and the church in Arabi was destroyed. We were saddened but realized as we began to reorganize in Atlanta that God had been preparing us for the new thing He was going to do, that is to operate both independently yet interdependently in ministry. He was preparing and teaching us how to thrive after a storm, not just survive.

While serving at the new church in New Orleans as senior pastor, I was excited that God had blessed me with the surprising opportunity to help sustain and grow it. I was being developed in areas of leadership and decision making as well as being trained to be sensitive to God’s voice. At the very start, I was given a word from God to schedule the worship service on Saturday rather than Sunday. I named it “Live at 5.” The new church service
change was fresh and fun but also wisdom from above, because it allowed me to continue to assist my husband with the other services at Greater St. Stephen.

Wisdom is the application of knowledge. The Bible says in Proverbs 4:7, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (KJV). As I look back, it was definitely the Lord’s leading for me to offer to help with the Arabi church; and although we did not rebuild the Arabi church, the experience of working there gave me the additional skill set I would need to help my husband rebuild the other locations in New Orleans and start the new ministry in Atlanta. I was given greater responsibility following Katrina as a co-pastor and in the new position of pastor in Atlanta. Dealing with the smaller challenges in Arabi, Louisiana, gave me the ability (with God’s help) to handle the larger congregation in New Orleans.

I still remember August 2005 like it was yesterday. We had just moved into our dream home, and our churches were thriving. The day before the storm I held my Saturday service in Arabi, Live at Five, right on schedule. One of our members had brought her entire family reunion to it. I stood around afterward exchanging hugs and conversation, but people kept coming up to me asking if I had heard about the storm. After the third person mentioned it, I left the church and decided to pick up some items from the grocery store before it hit.

I started to feel more urgency when I walked into the local convenience store and saw there was only one loaf of bread left on the shelf. I quickly grabbed it and headed to the counter, but
before I could get out my wallet, the cashier informed me she couldn’t sell it to me because she was holding it for the manager. People were becoming fearful, and some were even acting desperate as they got more information about the storm. After going back and forth for a bit, she finally gave in and let me buy the bread. Next, I stopped at a Chinese restaurant, and after I ordered my food, the cook in the kitchen appeared with a big pot of shrimp fried rice and told me I could take it all because they were shutting down for the night. I hurried home immediately after, because if the restaurant was giving away food, I chuckled to myself, “This storm must be severe.”

As soon as I walked in the door, my husband started giving me his own live weather report. At this point, I still did not understand the gravity of the storm that was approaching. New Orleans natives had adopted a culture of “riding out the storm” because during the past century, hurricanes had flooded New Orleans five times: in 1915, 1940, 1947, 1965, and 1969. But when I saw the look on my husband’s face as he described the forecast, I realized I needed to stop teasing him for always being glued to CNN. In fact, this storm convinced me I need to pay more attention to the news channels.

Although it was clear to me that a hurricane was coming, I wanted to stay in our house on the second floor during the storm. My thinking was that our stucco home was only one year old and strong. I had survived former storms in older one-story wooden homes, so I thought certainly this house could protect us, but my husband had already decided what we would do. I might point out here that all storms aren’t the same, which I will discuss later, and therefore each one may require “different movement.”

Since the mayor had issued a mandatory evacuation and the
airport was shutting down at noon the next day, my husband told me the details of the schedule for services the next morning and said that afterward we would fly out. New Orleans was in trouble because of its unusually high risk for flooding because half the city lies above sea level. Its average elevation is about six feet below sea level—and the city is surrounded by water. Neighborhoods that sat below sea level, many of which housed New Orleans’s poorest and most vulnerable people, were at significant risk of flooding. Officials worried that the surges could overtop some levees and cause short-term flooding, but no one predicted what would happen after Hurricane Katrina, when the levees collapsed. Thank God we left when we did; our home was in one of the areas that was hit the hardest.

Those few days, from Saturday morning through Monday evening, were a complete whirlwind. Saturday evening I immediately began making arrangements for my ailing mother, sister, and aunt, all of whom were my responsibility.

They were in medical facilities and in no condition to fly. I felt helpless. I contacted the facilities and a sitter to make arrangements for their care. Each facility assured me that their evacuation plans were already in progress; they would take them to a sister facility where they would be safe. My mind was racing with the what-ifs; however, at that moment, I had to place my trust in God and those administrators because there was nothing else I could do.

My husband, children—ages eighteen, twenty-four, and twenty-eight—along with my daughter’s husband and two kids (a two-year-old and a nine-month-old), and I packed our essentials and went to bed. The next morning, which was Sunday, we got up, preached at our service in New Orleans East, and instructed
our assistant pastors at our New Orleans uptown location to urge our church family to obey the mayor and evacuate. The service at our third location, located on the west bank of New Orleans, never happened because it was scheduled for 11:30 a.m., and evacuations were in full effect by then. We also followed the mayor’s instructions and boarded a plane, heading east because we had speaking engagements scheduled for that upcoming week in New Jersey and then Oakland, California. The pilot became ill, though, so he diverted the flight to Memphis, where we slept in a hotel for a short time. When the pilot awakened us, he informed us that the storm was headed toward our exact location, so we evacuated again with our children and grandchildren.

After we finally arrived in New Jersey, our family started to relax, but while my husband was talking to us, he suddenly stopped. I waited for him to continue, and when he finally did, he asked me to call the church where he would be speaking to tell them he would not be coming. He put his head in his hands and whispered a soft prayer. While the children and I attempted to get him to tell us what was wrong, he handed us his phone. He had received a text from a family friend that contained a picture of our tallest, most significant church building in New Orleans East—it was entirely submerged by water except for the very top of the steeple. All our locations were damaged by the storm, but this one was hit the hardest.

We all felt his extreme devastation; however, my perspective was about moving forward. Although he resisted, I encouraged my husband to go ahead and preach. I reminded him and our children that we were no longer in the storm. We had made it out. At first he was not receptive to my point of view at all. He was so gripped with the grief of the devastation he had seen in
that photo that he was inconsolable. I understood, but somehow I looked beyond that.

Emotions during devastation and challenges can be hard to control, and we cannot deny them because they are very much a part of being human. There are moments when life allows us to “stay there” a minute, to lock ourselves up in a room alone to weep or scream or curl up in a blanket and stare out the window all day. Been there, done that. On the other hand, there are times we must push past our emotions to keep our sanity and grab hold of our new normal.

I’m reminded of a story about King David, who taught this lesson during a huge storm in his life.

And it came to pass, when David and his men were come to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the south, and Ziklag, and smitten Ziklag, and burned it with fire;

And had taken the women captives, that were therein: they slew not any, either great or small, but carried them away, and went on their way.

So David and his men came to the city, and, behold, it was burned with fire; and their wives, and their sons, and their daughters, were taken captives.

Then David and the people that were with him lifted up their voice and wept, until they had no more power to weep.

And David’s two wives were taken captives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the wife of Nabal the Carmelite.

And David was greatly distressed; for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters: but David encouraged himself in the LORD his God. (1 Sam. 30:1–6 KJV)
Often, when devastation hits, we look for external things to soothe or fulfill us, but we must pull strength from within. King David wept when he saw that what he valued was gone, but he inquired of God through prayer as to what he should do. Scripture says that afterward he encouraged himself. We must learn to pull ourselves out of dark situations by looking to God in order to discover the strength that’s beneath the surface—under that hurt, sadness, confusion, and emptiness—and pull out healing for our souls.

So I gave my husband as encouraging push and challenged him to change his perspective, then left him alone at the hotel for a while to regroup. Later, when I returned, we received a call from a CNN reporter who had learned we were nearby. He asked my husband to come and speak on behalf of those who, like us, were victims of the chaos of Katrina. He accepted the invitation and spoke on camera, encouraging the people of Louisiana, his church family, the nation, his natural family, and most important, himself. People expressed to us how encouraged they were after seeing and hearing him. When he finished speaking, he had found the strength to go on and complete his scheduled assignment—a preaching engagement in New York, which was very close to our hotel in New Jersey. God ministered to him while he was ministering to our churches and the world. Looking at King David again, when he was extremely down and out from the loss of family and possessions, he found enough strength to ask God what he should do next in his storm. David realized his assignment from God to care for humanity was not over. It was time to recover all. I was so heartened by his rekindled courage.

Here, I believe, it is important to speak about devastation and leadership. If you are a leader in a challenging situation, it can be
overwhelming, especially when you are hurting as well. However, “whom God calls, He qualifies.” Throughout my ministry years, I have been able to observe many people, from a distance and up close. God gives His leaders additional stamina, insight, confidence, and supernatural faith to move through these situations. When Moses was asked to approach the evil Egyptian king and command him to let the Israelites go, he said to God, “I’m nobody special to represent You. I can’t speak on the people’s behalf; I’m not articulate, and I have no real power to overtake him.” Most people who are called to lead never feel adequate or qualified. However, when they answer the call, they do things so amazing that they are amazed themselves.

I have also seen strong leaders emerge during calamity. Just like Moses, these leaders begin to tell God why they are not the ones who should go, only for God to prove they were always the leaders meant for that appointed time. They are like those first responders who come out of nowhere and save people from otherwise fatal situations. The leader in them responded so quickly that they shocked themselves. After the CNN appearance, I watched my husband shift from survival mode to thrive mode.

Although my husband told me that Satan had said “it was over for him,” and despite the many people who wrote ugly things on the internet about our loss, the thing my husband held on to was God telling him that his latter days would be greater than his former. For him, Hurricane Katrina was a Category 5 storm. He felt, at his age, it would be hard to rebuild. To add to that, Satan gave him a visual of his loss when someone, trying to be helpful, texted that picture, taken from a helicopter, of our largest church facility underwater. I told him, “Honey! Stop worrying and don’t
look at that picture. We are still alive and able to go on. God will sustain us.” He called me his “aggravating angel.” I’ll take that.

My husband and I both weathered the storm, but we learned different lessons from it. My husband’s ministry load increased. It seemed like the entire world was looking to him for inspiration and direction during and after the storm. Everybody looked to him, yet he was in the midst of the storm himself. As a true help-meet, I began to encourage him.

Later we would learn that we had lost most of our material possessions. Our dream home, pictures, clothes, and belongings were all gone, as 80 percent of our beloved New Orleans was flooded with stormwater. The two things I did have, though, were my family and my faith. To this day, that has made all the difference in how I viewed the storm, and that is my first lesson for you. No matter how bad life looks, when you have your family and your health, when you are still breathing and functioning—or as our elders would say, “still in your right mind”—you have a lot to be grateful for. Because when you’ve lost something precious, something irreplaceable, the material things that can be replaced become less significant.

Gratitude is everything. Learning how to be grateful for what you have left is sometimes the very key to surviving a tragedy. You have probably heard the adage, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade,” but I am here to tell you that sometimes there is no sugar and you have to find something else to do with the lemons. Sometimes you just have to be determined to see the glass half full instead of half empty, and other times you have to be content with just having a glass.

My point is that all the cute sayings and social media quotes are great, but in life when the rains come and the storms howl,
you must be determined to live life after the storm. And this book is dedicated to motivating you to do just that. I am so excited that you have decided to take this journey with me.

The Eye of the Storm

Before I dive into the storm lessons, I want to share with you how I was inspired to write this book. After we survive a storm and life is pretty much back to normal, we see things a little more clearly. We can look back with hindsight that offers a helpful perspective. This type of understanding may feel like it comes out of nowhere, when we least expect it. But this “sight” is why I’m so sure that life is a journey with a beginning, middle, and end.

I am also entirely convinced that there is a Power guiding each of our lives for a purpose. Regardless of what school faculty are required to teach, I do not believe we came out of nowhere. The creation story in Genesis provides evidence to the contrary. The problem with teaching individuals that they evolved over time from cavemen is that it eliminates an important piece of the first man’s dilemma. God said that it was not good for Adam to be alone, so He put Adam to sleep and created a suitable helpmeet for him, Eve. The same way that God knew from the beginning of time that Adam should not be alone, I also believe that we need to exist in a world with meaningful human connection from day to day. People have a right to believe whatever they want. But it does make me sad to imagine the fulfillment they are missing because of that disconnected mind-set.

I receive such joy, understanding, and satisfaction from the power of divine connection with mankind (spending time with
my family, friends, and congregants) and nature (some of the best and most relaxing times of my life have been spent enjoying beach sand and ocean waves). For me, times of connecting with people and enjoying scenic escapes are indispensable. Our human connections and positive life experiences can calm us when the storms of life begin to pour devastation upon us. Although the difficulties that occur in storms are daunting, I can stand firm because I believe in a divine Power that always will work out every situation for my good as long as my mind-set and actions align with God’s will and purpose for my life.

I was inspired to write this book after I had been meditating about my life for months. I knew I was to write a book. As I wondered what the book would be about, my thoughts were interrupted, and I heard, “You’re a grown woman now because you weathered the storms.” I responded, “Yes, I am!” I became even more excited and grateful as I pondered all the things I had survived.

I was reminded that Hurricanes Betsy, Katrina, Rita, and others were not the only storms I had been through! I had been through many other storms that didn’t contain bad weather but bad conditions. I had even survived what I call “baby storms.” I realize most grown men and women were once broken little boys and girls because of baby storms. Baby storms are the things we have gone through before we actually knew how to spell storm; we were too young to understand the depth and effect of the hurt, despair, and damage certain situations had on us. Unfortunately, as we grew to adulthood, we then discovered we had scars we couldn’t really explain. I believe through this book, if you allow Him, God will perform supernatural plastic surgery on you to remove the scars and stigma of shame, disgrace, hurt,
devastation, pain, insecurity, and fear, and you will experience a life that’s victorious.

Weeks after I was inspired to write this book, I was in a car riding through the SoHo area in New York with my godbrother, enjoying the weather, when I had a vision. I said to him, “I just got a vision for a painting.” I shared it with him, and he said he knew just the artist to make it come alive. In the vision, I saw stormwaters. People were running, crying, and swimming; others were in boats being rescued by first responders. I knew it was a mental picture of that dreadful day of Katrina. The water was tumultuous, and the winds were fierce. Something spoke to me in that vision, saying, “This is when the eye of the storm hit.” It saddened me.

The eyewall of the storm is the worst part of any storm. When it hits, it destroys, and when it hit New Orleans, the destruction was mind-blowing. Although this vision happened years after the hurricane, I was shaken; that part of the scene still evoked a certain amount of emotion in me. However, the interesting thing about the vision was that there was an actual eye in the midst of the storm, a human eye that was looking at everything. It caught my attention and moved me away from all the chaos.

As I came out of the vision, I understood the revelation of it. God explained to me that the eye above the disaster was His eye. Yes, He saw the storm, and although the eyewall of a storm is the most destructive part, His eye is always there to get our attention and help us realize that if we look to Him, we will not only survive the storm but thrive beyond the storm. Later I realized that vision was God fine-tuning the content for the book I would write.

No, Katrina is not the only storm I’ve been through, but each
time I have experienced one I have walked away with invaluable insight that I am compelled to share. I pray it will help everyone who reads this book connect the dots and paint a brand-new picture after each storm.

Storm Playbook Study

Chapter Summary

• Although it can be challenging to watch the news and keep up with current events, particularly because of the negativity that results from that, it is important to stay in the know about things that can affect your life such as weather forecasts, national product recalls, prominent and local deaths, etc.
• Gratitude is essential for living a positive life. Being able to focus on the positive while acknowledging the negative (not being in complete denial of challenge) is crucial.
• During the darkest hours of your life, one way to find encouragement is to become a source of encouragement for someone else.
• Meaningful human connection is not optional. God did not think it was a good idea for Adam to be alone, and the same is true for you and me.

Journaling

1. Gratitude is a major component discussed in this chapter. How can you maintain your “attitude of gratitude” during the challenges you face?
2. My husband gained strength by encouraging others when
he was deeply devastated by the storm’s effects. Whom can you encourage and strengthen in times of challenge?

Storm Survivor: Joseph

Joseph is a wonderful example of a storm survivor. His storm troubles began brewing early. First, he was his father’s favorite, which created tension and animosity between him and his brothers. Next, his father demonstrated his special love for Joseph by giving him a coat of many colors. The brothers barely contained their simmering jealousy at the gift, and it soon turned to burning hatred when Joseph shared two dreams that seemed to imply the family would one day bow down to Joseph. The brothers decided to act on this hatred one day when they were out with their father’s flocks, planning to kill Joseph but first throwing him into a cistern (Gen. 37:18–24). Then they had a “better” idea:

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed.

So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. (vv. 25–28)
Although the story begins in Genesis 37, it does not end here. You can continue reading about Joseph’s defeats and victories in Genesis 39–50.

Joseph’s brothers first wanted to kill him, but then they settled for selling him into slavery. But, as you follow the life of Joseph, you find that he maintained a positive outlook, held fast to his integrity, and left every place he ended up in a better condition than it was before his arrival. Joseph’s story is a pivotal example to all of us that even when storms come into our lives that lead us into negative situations and unfortunate circumstances, God is always with us. If we remain obedient to Him, He has a plan in mind not only to prosper us but others. Later, when Joseph has an opportunity to help his family, he is able to declare to his brothers: “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive” (Gen. 50:20 NKJV).

**Memory Verse**

Day by day the LORD takes care of the innocent, and they will receive an inheritance that lasts forever. They will not be disgraced in hard times; even in famine they will have more than enough.

—Psalm 37:18–19 NLT
CHAPTER 2

Life Interrupted

Surviving Unexpected Tragedy
Storms continued to hammer the United States in 2017. Houston was hit by Hurricane Harvey, and at the time of this writing, Hurricane Maria had still left our Puerto Rican sisters and brothers without necessities such as running water and electricity. The cost of the devastation of these recent storms is still being calculated, but before these storms, Hurricane Katrina was recorded as the most destructive hurricane to strike the United States and the costliest, causing $108 billion in damage, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).¹

By the time Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans on Monday, August 29, it had already been raining heavily for hours. That morning Katrina swept over the Gulf Coast of the United States as a Category 3 rating on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale. Aside from the abundance of rain, the hurricane brought sustained winds of 100 to 140 miles per hour and was stretched some four hundred miles across. The storm itself did a great deal of damage, but its aftermath was catastrophic. New Orleans missed a direct hit from Katrina and instead the hurricane made landfall on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where it caused severe destruction. It was the ensuing breach of the levee system that was responsible for most of the death and devastation in New Orleans. When the storm surge (as high as nine meters in...
some places) arrived, it overwhelmed many of the city’s unstable levees and drainage canals. It was as if the wind-tattered city was sitting in a bowl of water.⁴

A 2015 *Live Science* article quoted Sandy Rosenthal, an American civic activist who founded the group Levees.Org soon after Hurricane Katrina in order to educate the public about the reason for the levee failures and disastrous flooding in New Orleans during Katrina. Rosenthal, a known critic of the Army Corps, asserted, “The surge exposed engineering mistakes in the levees and floodwalls designed and built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, causing extensive flooding throughout the New Orleans region.”³

Those engineering issues resulted in catastrophic damage to the region as water seeped through the soil underneath some levees and swept others away altogether. By 9:00 a.m. on August 29, low-lying places like St. Bernard Parish and the Ninth Ward were under so much water that people had to scramble to attics and rooftops for safety. Another reason for the devastation was the number of people who could not escape the storm. Some 112,000 of New Orleans’s nearly 500,000 people did not have access to a car.⁴ Eventually, nearly 80 percent of the city was under some quantity of water.⁵

I can attest to the validity of the many statistics provided. The lower level of my own home was filled with fourteen feet of water. My family members also have horror stories from the days following the hurricane. My brother and his wife and children barely escaped the devastation in the Ninth Ward. As a result of the breach in the levee, their home was completely destroyed. My seventy-seven-year-old dad and stepmom, who had evacuated with my other sister, Sharon, and her husband before the storm
hit, went back to their shared New Orleans East home, which was in good shape until the levee broke. My dad had returned from the store and was in the kitchen when my nephew noticed that my dad’s car was starting to fill up with water outside. Soon after that, the rising water levels began to come inside the house. My father and stepmom (who was on dialysis), along with my sister, her husband, and their children, had to escape to the over one-hundred-degree attic for three days to avoid drowning, as the water (seemingly from nowhere) filled their home. There was nowhere left to go. We could hear the devastation in my dad’s voice as he shared the experience with us.

Although he was a war hero, because of the extreme heat, lack of drinking water, no phones, and no help in an evacuated area, my father said he thought for a moment they would all die in that attic. He could hear the helicopter come near my sister’s house, but it never came to rescue them. Finally, his son-in-law hammered through the roof until he opened a small hole just large enough to push a broken compact mirror through. My father told me he felt it in his heart when on that third day the rescuers saw that little mirror reflection. Although the rescuers had left the area days before without seeing or hearing them, on day three of my family being in the attic, they came back and rescued my dad and my sister’s family via helicopter. There was something about that third day, just like the resurrection story.

Before the storm, nearly 30 percent of New Orleans children lived in poverty. Katrina intensified and worsened these conditions by leaving many of New Orleans’s most impoverished even more vulnerable than they had been before the storm. Additionally, the devastation of the storm was not only restricted to socioeconomic effects but also to emotional ones. According to the New York
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*Times*, surveys completed in the first seven years after Katrina revealed that “the rate of diagnosable mental health problems in the New Orleans area jumped by 9 percent—a sharper spike than after other natural disasters—and the effects did not discriminate much between race or income.” That’s another statistic I lived. My mom, who had Alzheimer’s, was in a nursing facility, and my sister was in another facility for mental illness. Both facilities had to evacuate.

For a long time, I had no way to find out where they were, but I just had an overwhelming sense of peace that they were safe. Although I had no way of knowing for sure, because of the Holy Spirit’s calming presence I maintained a peace that surpassed my limited human understanding.

As pastors, my husband and I lost many members to either forced relocation or, worse, death, especially among the elderly. In all, Hurricane Katrina killed nearly two thousand people and affected some ninety thousand square miles of the United States. Hundreds of thousands of those evacuees were scattered far and wide. Katrina evacuees fled to states all across the USA, but the most substantial number went to Texas. Some resettled in cities like Houston and Austin; others returned to New Orleans. Large numbers of evacuees also relocated to Atlanta and Baton Rouge. According to the NOAA, it was one of the most massive displacements of a population since the Great Depression, and the Data Center, an independent research organization in New Orleans, found that the storm displaced more than one million people in the Gulf Coast region. While many of the tourist areas, such as the French Quarter, have recovered, there are still neighborhoods just a short ride from the city that have completely vanished forever. At the foot of Canal Street, a local funeral home built a
monument that lists the names of hundreds who died without a decent burial.

**Storm Grade System**

If this is your first time reading about this storm, I know it can be a lot to take in. It was a lot for those of us who survived it. However, for me, it was not the worst storm I had ever experienced. I want to give you your first strategy for successful storm survival. It is *grade your storms*.

We live in a time where social media firestorms can create almost instant crises. Unfortunately, the event that starts the crisis does not even have to be real. NBC’s super popular show *This Is Us* created a PR crisis for Newell Brands, the makers of the Crock-Pot. A character on the show died as a result of a faulty Crock-Pot. Mass hysteria broke out, and people began throwing their Crock-Pots away and removing the item from wedding registry lists, according to WGRZ News.⁹

Now, as sad as the episode was, it was not real. We live in a time where the line between reality and fiction can become blurred pretty quickly. Newell Brands reached out to the cast of the show to help them calm viewers down and the crisis was averted, but it is remarkable how quickly the panic spread.

In our everyday lives, situations cannot be fixed with a press release, celebrity appeals and endorsements, or a Twitter campaign. In real life, we have to understand what constitutes a storm for us. A life event that makes me cry might make you angry enough to fight; perception indeed makes up the individual’s
reality. Although all storms take something away, I have learned they can also leave behind something invaluable.

For me, when Katrina hit, although it was an earth-shattering experience, it was not the worst storm of my life. That plane ride through Hurricane Katrina wasn’t new. My Category 5 storm had already happened. One night thirteen years earlier, my husband and I flew through another storm to get to my daughter and son-in-law. Their daughter, my first grandbaby, had been admitted to the hospital for a virus, but after only an hour and a half there she died unexpectedly. We lost her at eighteen months old. It was one of the most painful experiences I’d ever had, and it left me in a state of numbness. Grandparents know what I mean. I felt dead inside. There was nothing I could do to bring her back. My grandbaby was gone. I was confused, angry, and filled with grief.

There are five stages of grief in the Kübler-Ross model: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I felt like I was going through the first four continually, almost as if I were stuck on a merry-go-round. Eventually, though, I was able to arrive at acceptance through my faith and prayers and the grace and power of God. After I survived that Category 5, losing my dream home was not even a Category 3 to me. When my children would comfort me about the loss of my house, I would say, “I don’t care about that. I’m glad we are all safe.” I think they thought I had lost my mind, but I was serious.

There were people who were missing loved ones and didn’t know if they’d ever see them again. I could empathize because it had taken me a while to locate my elderly aunt. So many older people died during the storm; stranded in care facilities, many just could not get out. When the water surge hit the city, so many, like
my dad, thought it was safe to return. As I said, he had evacuated but returned to the city as soon as the storm was over. Normally after a few days or a week it is safe to return home. Although the storm was over, we were upset that our dad had returned back that soon. Those of us who had lived in New Orleans all our lives believed that when hurricanes were over, they were completely over and it was safe to return. As I mentioned earlier, my father returned after Katrina to my sister’s house but quickly realized that was a bad idea. No one expected the levee to break. Although outside it was sunny and hot, in a short time there was water everywhere. Though they were eventually rescued, so many others were not as fortunate.

Managing to make it out of the storm with our family intact was a great miracle. I know families who are still spread out after Katrina, and even though they now know where everyone is, they had to wait months before they even found their family members. The level of unrest, uncertainty, and disconnection for many people was unbearable. The displacement of one million people is a Category 5 storm—at least it was in the lives of those families. Losing my granddaughter was so painful to me that losing furniture and a house meant nothing in comparison. I can replace those material possessions, but I can’t replace my loved ones.

I learned that life is the most precious gift. As long as we are alive, we can reboot and start all over, from scratch if necessary. I was distressed for other people after Hurricane Katrina, but I wasn’t sad for myself because losing a grandchild to a virus was the most horrifying, heartbreaking tragedy I’d ever experienced—it changed my “crisis scale.” As long as I had breath in
my body, God, and my family, nothing else could rock me to the core.

I challenge you to take out that notebook or journal you have been keeping and create your own scale. According to *Coastal Living*, here are the effects in the natural realm of each storm category, based on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale:

- **Category 1**: You can expect winds to range from 74 to 95 miles per hour, and they can be expected to cause some minor damage to property. Injuries to humans and animals can also occur because of isolated falling debris.
- **Category 2**: You can expect winds to range from 96 to 110 miles per hour and cause extensive property damage. These wind speeds heighten the risk of injury because of more debris and structural damage to buildings. There will likely be flooding in low-lying areas, widespread power outages, and in many cases, water filtration systems failure.
- **Category 3**: You can expect winds ranging from 111 to 130 miles per hour, causing significant damage to property, animals, and humans. Poorly constructed homes will be destroyed, and well-built structures will still sustain damage. Extensive inland flooding is more likely with a Category 3, and water and electricity are often unavailable for weeks after this kind of storm.
- **Category 4**: You can expect winds to range from 131 to 155 miles per hour and cause catastrophic damage to property, animals, and humans. All types of buildings are vulnerable to structural damage, and water and electricity shortages can last from many weeks to many months.
- **Category 5**: You can expect winds at or greater than
155 miles per hour, which cause catastrophic damage to property, animals, and humans. This storm will cause the complete or almost-complete destruction of mobile homes, frame homes, apartments, and shopping centers, and almost all trees in the affected area will be snapped or uprooted. Power outages and water shortages can last for weeks and possibly months, and most of the affected area will be uninhabitable for weeks or months.\textsuperscript{10}

Now, as you read these categories, think about your own life. For one person, a Category 1 may be a promotion denial. You may have wanted that job, but being passed over for the position is not going to cause any real damage. You will apply again or maybe even somewhere else.

A Category 2 may be the demise of a friendship that you thought would last forever. It hurts, but you will recover, even if it takes some time.

A Category 3 maybe you contracting a sickness that is curable but having to fight it, like some forms of cancer. That storm is attacking and seeking to destroy you, but you can get to safety and ride it out. It may be tough for weeks or months as you endure treatments and expensive medications, but in the end you will survive.

A Category 4 may be a devastating divorce. When two people marry, the Bible says they become one flesh,\textsuperscript{11} so to divorce can feel like literally ripping away a body part. If you have children, it may be even worse, depending on how they cope and what level storm the breakup is for them. If it uproots them and takes them to a new school and away from familiar surroundings and friends, for them it may be a Category 5.
The levels of devastation for you are what define a storm for your life. It is okay if your storm grades are different from someone else’s. The crisis for one person is not the same as another’s. I did not throw my Crock-Pot away after that This Is Us episode, but I understand the genuine feelings of the individuals who did.

If you can grade it, you can assess the storm’s impact on you. If you can determine the impact, you can do what you need to do to clean up the debris from it. You can also seek help from a neighbor to assist you in cleaning up after the storm. Additionally, you may opt to seek out higher elevation with a seasoned storm survivor who can help you with the storm you are experiencing.

Unfortunately, you will find that storms change your life forever. New Orleans changed forever after Katrina. Even after extensive rebuilding, certain aspects of the city will never be the same. I survived my granddaughter’s passing, but I will never be the same. There is something missing from my life I can never replace. However, I let these storms teach me powerful lessons that I can now pass along to you.

Grade your storms, because there is more work for you do and a greater life awaiting you than anything you have lost or left behind. You need to be committed to doing the work to manifest your healing, grasp your purpose, and move passionately toward your destiny! I am cheering you on all the way. Now that we have learned about our storms and the importance of grading them, let’s talk about growing from them.
Storm Playbook Study

Chapter Summary

• Be aware that storms affect everyone differently.
• Never give up, even when the situation looks hopeless and dead; we serve a God who often shows up symbolically on the “third day.”
• All storms are not alike. Grading your storms can help you apply the best preventative and restorative measures.

Journaling

1. What storms have you already weathered in your life? Write them in your journal, and next to each storm, grade them according to the scale provided in this chapter.
2. What did each storm teach you?

Storm Survivor: Ruth

Our next storm survivor, Ruth, a woman of the country of Moab, is remarkable for a few reasons. Ruth became a widow as a young woman. Losing your spouse is tough at any age, especially unexpectedly. When Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, chose to return to Israel, her homeland, after her husband and both her sons had died, Ruth and her sister-in-law, Orpah, followed after her, saying they would go with her, but Naomi protested:

“Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and
should also bear sons, would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!”

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

And she said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

But Ruth said:

“Entreat me not to leave you,  
Or to turn back from following after you;  
For wherever you go, I will go;  
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;  
Your people shall be my people,  
And your God, my God.  
Where you die, I will die,  
And there will I be buried.  
The LORD do so to me, and more also,  
If anything but death parts you and me.”

(Ruth 1:11–17 NKJV)

Ruth made an unconventional choice; she remained loyal to her mother-in-law, Naomi, who was so melancholy she renamed herself Mara to reflect the overwhelming bitterness she felt. But Ruth decided to return to her mother-in-law’s land, where she would be a foreigner and looked down upon due to her heritage so that she could help care for Naomi.

Ruth is a wonderful reminder that God can take a storm and “relocate” you to a better situation and overall better life. Ruth
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immediately received favor upon arriving in her new country. I suggest you read the entire book of Ruth (it is only four chapters). Ruth became the wife of one of Naomi’s kinsmen, and both women ended up living a biblical happily ever after.

Memory Verse

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

—James 1:2–4
CHAPTER 3

Maturity

Mandatory Growth
Every individual has a decision to make when faced with a storm in their life. While storms will always occur, it is the individual’s choice whether to learn from them. Too often a storm happens and the person stays the same. These situations often lead to the person facing cycles of very similar tests or storms until they change their reaction to it. In my line of work, I consistently meet people from all walks of life. So many people end up living mediocre lives after their storms because they refuse to learn and grow from them.

One area where you will repeatedly be challenged in life is the area of relationships. One day recently I was walking to my car, and a young lady from my office joined me and started telling me about a situation with her car. I asked her what had happened to it, and she described in depth how her new boyfriend had gotten into some trouble with the law. When the authorities caught up with him, he was driving her car; they took him and her car was impounded. Being a mom, I had a lot of questions (such as: Why are you dating a criminal and allowing him to drive your vehicle? Is this the only guy available?), but I refrained from asking them because she was not family. As I listened, I realized that sometimes people make poor choices when it pertains to romantic relationships. I can give you another example.

Once, a young lady came into my office crying because her
boyfriend of several years had suddenly left. Shortly after his disappearance, she discovered that pictures of him with another girl were all over social media. The saddest part is she never saw it coming. Her life now in shambles, she was devastated and a complete wreck. As sad as her story is, it is not even the worst one I have heard.

Another young lady I knew, a highly intelligent woman with three degrees and the ability to speak two languages, was almost homeless after marrying a man who had presented himself as the perfect guy. She later found out that during that time he was still married with a wife and three kids. Their whole relationship was a lie. Nothing prepared her for that level of hurt and pain.

Many times relationships fail because we let them replace our relationship with God. We begin to not trust in Him when other relationships come along offering us natural fulfillment. We don’t admit it because we are unaware of Satan’s tactics. He is subtle but destructive. He disguises himself with compliments, flattery, and companionship. Some people struggle because of terrible childhood experiences, bouts of rejection, and broken spirits. Satan enters in through those open wounds and causes people to seek false fulfillment from false gods who make compelling promises that disguise deceit. They promise rewards they cannot fulfill.

Our relationship with God will cause us to have more honest and fruitful relationships. I’ve discovered that at the root of my relationships I must understand that God is good and God is love. If I stay connected to Him, I can experience healthy, long-lasting relationships, whereas relationships where Satan is in the midst will eventually disappoint us and God! We see the evidence of deceit and disappointment in a relationship in Genesis 3:1–7.
The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day he asked the woman, “Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?”

“Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden,” the woman replied. “It’s only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, ‘You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.’”

“You won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.”

The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. (NLT)

God designed the earth with the intent that mankind would enjoy it and live to the full. The very first man and woman, Adam and Eve, were created in His image and then blessed to rule and have authority over all the good things He had made and God provided for them to live a good life. However, we must . . .
Beware of Satan’s Tactics

Satan does not want us to enjoy life or one another. His goal is to insert, in our minds and hearts, doubt and mistrust in one another and eventually disappointment, failure, and shame.

Satan uses his influence to make us desire to know as much or more than God, just as he did with Eve. That way we will not consult God for a mate or for answers about the mate we already have, but instead choose to go our own way. Eventually our own smarts will come back to haunt us. We will realize Satan’s direction was wrong and caused a negative impact in our life. In our world today, we have more information than ever, yet we also have more broken relationships and lonely people than ever, and, consequently, more broken families. Satan has caused man to move further and further away from God. For millions of people, it seems that life will never get better. During and after a storm, we can be at our most vulnerable, but if through prayer and meditation we make ourselves more aware of Satan’s tactics, we can affect this world in a positive way by our healthy relationships.

Example Tactic 1: Conversations that go against God’s Word and good moral living.

This may seem old-fashioned, but it still works in my life. Toxic, evil, or negative conversation is a sure sign that Satan is present and trying to cause conflict. He did it to Eve. He makes you question the right thing you are doing. He also makes you suspicious of other people’s good deeds. Trust is a huge part of healthy relationships; when it is absent, the relationship becomes a burden.
Conversations with Satan are not always as evident as it was with Eve. Satan is not a snake or a serpent on its belly. Satan may look very beautiful or handsome, but the conversations are void of what’s good and truthful. He tells partial truths in order to deceive. People don’t come crawling on their belly, but they can indeed be snakes. Beware. For instance, a guy once asked me if I was married. I said, “Yes, for many years.” His next question was, “But are you happy?” I knew immediately it was Satan talking. Even if I was not happy, God would not use that angle to help me. Marriage is honorable, so there are no buts. Sure, we will have problems in relationships, but we should seek godly counsel: “The godly offer good counsel; they teach right from wrong” (Ps. 37:30 NLT).

Through spending time with God and His Word, we begin to grow in our understanding of the Creator as well as begin to engage in and cultivate more mature and healthy relationships. Too many people are underdeveloped spiritually and emotionally. Hebrews 5:14 says, “But solid food is for the mature—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil” (CSB).

We must realize we have a spirit that lives in a body and possesses a soul. You must have a spiritual connection with the One who created you in order to understand how you tick. This knowledge will, in turn, help balance your emotions. Why? We will not react so quickly to what people say, especially untruths, because we will be more in touch with our truth: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32 KJV).
We must know ourselves or we will deceive our own selves. When we don’t know our own soul and our deep desires (perhaps for attention or fame), we can be enticed into wrong relationships. When we’re weak, we cause others to be weak. That is what happened with Eve. She was enticed by the opportunity to have more knowledge about life, so she ate the forbidden fruit. The sad thing is that she caused another person to fall as well. In that kind of relationship, no one thrives.

Spiritual Maturity Will Be the Result of Connecting to God’s Spirit

“And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18 kjv). Let me offer an explanation for this scripture. As we connect with God’s Spirit and allow Him to flow through us—mind, body, and emotions—He will help train our senses to distinguish between good and evil, and you will be able to use this training in your own relationships as well as help others experience the same. We need more wise teachers in our world.

There are other types of storms that are proven to test our maturity.

1. Facing career and/or business difficulty.
   Few things mature you like taking a severe financial hit. Think about it: no one escapes the IRS indefinitely. Tax debts catch up with you. I know a young man who didn’t file a tax return for seven years. Now he will be paying more to the IRS for the next fifteen years because he owes $50,000 in back taxes. It
was immaturity that made him think he could evade the federal government forever.

Sometimes the financial decisions made in our youth can have devastating consequences later in life. For example, Americans are drowning in student loan debt.\(^1\) Many people borrowed more money than they needed and used their refund checks to “live large.” Others stayed in school and took out loans because they didn’t know what career path to follow or because they simply didn’t want to get a job. Of course, for-profit colleges and climbing tuition rates have contributed to the problem, but being smart with choosing a college helps. College is a time for getting an education that creates a solid career foundation, it should not be a time to accrue debt.

Negative career choices and failed business ventures also test maturity. I have counseled individuals who hop from job to job and wonder why they cannot move up the corporate ladder. I know people who are so fed up with their nine-to-five that they quit their job and prematurely start a business that fails because of poor planning and no capital. Poor business decisions happen at every level. On a larger scale, bad business deals create losses that force the company to restructure, which usually leads to massive layoffs.

As devastating as all these situations can be, when people’s pocketbooks or wallets suffer enough hits, they change their financial decision making. Think about the first time a prospective homebuyer has their credit score pulled only to find out they don’t have a high enough score required to close the deal. That person is devastated, but often they find that was the push they needed to change their spending and bill-paying patterns.
2. Parenting.

I can say without a doubt that few things challenge a person’s maturity like having a child. Consequently, having children is one of the most significant, life-changing decisions a person can make, but there are no requirements or special certifications needed to have a baby. Maturity is needed when you bring a life into the world because you are now tasked with taking care of someone who is solely dependent on you. You should live a little differently, being conscious that you have someone who is looking to you as their example. Ultimately, children will do what you do and not what you say. Maturity causes you to recognize that you may not have all the answers, but you can work to find them. You look to more experienced parents whose parenting practices you respect for advice and strategies on how to be the best parent possible.

Proverbs 22:6 states, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (NKJV). In the church world, we’ve viewed that scripture to mean that if you raise your children in the right way, regardless of the path they choose they will eventually come back to the “right way.” I would like to submit a different point of view. Parents carry a grave responsibility to model appropriate behavior for their children so that they will be productive members of society, yet many parents do not understand the full weight of that responsibility. Children today are being raised without strong moral values and are instead being trained by their parents to pursue a life absent of morality. Based on the scripture, we can see why we have older adults still living lives of immorality; it is because they
have not departed from the way in which they were trained. It works both ways.

After you learn these relational, financial, and parental lessons, you are now qualified to teach them to others. We are all called to be teachers. God designed us that way. There is always someone watching each of us, whether we want them to or not. So learn the lesson and then be the teacher. A side benefit is that once you learn the lesson, you don’t have to retake the test. There is nothing worse than repeating a grade because you did not learn the material. You want to make sure you don’t repeat unproductive cycles in your life because you refuse to learn the lesson offered.

Now it is time to recover from the painful event that put you in the situation in the first place. Let’s talk about how you do just that.

**Steps for Recovering from a Storm**

I have shared some of my experiences that occurred right after Hurricane Katrina. Now I want to share steps to help you cope as you work toward recovering from the storms that have hit your life.

1. **Heed the warnings.**

   When you are mature, you don’t have to be told something repeatedly. You can be warned instead of having to go through each trial firsthand. So many difficulties could be avoided if we would only listen to the advice or instruction that we are given the first time. During Katrina, we had people who suffered because they had the means to leave the city and did not. They felt they
knew better than the professionals. If you are going to take that kind of risk, you must be sure you are correct. There is an excellent example of this in the 2004 hit movie Million Dollar Baby. Margaret “Maggie” Fitzgerald, played by Hilary Swank, a waitress and wannabe boxer from the Missouri Ozarks, shows up in the Hit Pit, a run-down gym in Los Angeles operated by Frankie Dunn, an ornery boxing trainer, played by actor Clint Eastwood.

Frankie refuses to train Maggie at first but eventually is won over by her skill and her ability to fill the paternal hole in his heart left by his estranged daughter. She gets good at boxing and wins a bunch of fights. Then she gets challenged to go up against a German fighter with a reputation of fighting dirty, nicknamed Billie “the Blue Bear.” Frankie knows instantly that this fight is a bad idea. He tries to discourage Maggie from accepting the challenge, but they proceed. Although the match begins with a rough start for Maggie, during the fight she starts to gain the upper hand. When Billie realizes that she will not beat Maggie fair and square, she hits Maggie with an illegal sucker punch. Maggie falls, landing so that she breaks her neck, which leaves her paralyzed.

My point in sharing this example is no matter if it is a Category 3 storm or a boxing match with a dirty-playing opponent, there are some risks you shouldn’t take. None of you would let an unrepentant, unapologetic killer live in your house. It is not wise and too big of a risk. You must strive to heighten your discernment and operate in wisdom to avoid these kinds of pitfalls. The most painless recoveries are the ones you don’t have to make because you made a quality decision instead.
2. Take time to assess the situation.

There is absolutely no way to know just how detrimental a challenge may be at first glance. You must learn to take the time to investigate the situations that come into your life and assess them correctly. Every problem you face is not a negative one. Some incidents help us grow up. Some circumstances help us know the people who are negative influences and therefore need to be eliminated from our circle. It is incredible to me how so many of us are just like Little Red Riding Hood and can’t tell the difference between Grandma and the Big Bad Wolf—even when in the back of our minds we know something is not right and we are uncomfortable with the situation. Let’s be clear: as a Christian, we know that the Holy Spirit warns us if something is not right. We will avoid some horrible pitfalls if we listen to Him. For every potentially harmful situation, He gives us an escape plan.

First Corinthians 10:13 declares, “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (KJV). The temptations are the situations we face in our lives that help us assess where we are as believers. Be assured that every obstacle, every opportunity to make the wrong decision, is coupled with an escape plan.

The Holy Spirit is talking all the time, but are you heeding His voice? He helps you look at the situation with a fresh perspective. He lets you see the way to escape so you can bear the consequences of your decision. He shows us the way to get out of a potentially adverse situation every time. We all can look
back on an act we engaged in that had negative consequences and determine the exact time when we could have made a different choice.

One of the best ways to ensure that you are able to see a situation clearly is to get enough sleep on a regular basis, but not so much sleep that you are not accomplishing anything. Think about when an infant is born—sleep is the thing they do the most to grow strong and remain healthy. They sleep most of the day, and unfortunately for most parents, almost not at all at night. Know that you need the proper amount of rest to aid you in your assessment process. Don’t forget: as humans we are mind, body, and spirit. Oh, and you are not Superman or Wonder Woman!

3. Create an action plan for your next steps.

New Year’s resolutions do not work because they are ideas without action plans. If you are going to produce anything, you will have to create a plan to bring it to fruition.

Farming is a great example of the need for planning. There are seasons to plant, and there are seasons to harvest. If you don’t know the seasons, then you cannot execute the steps it will take to produce the crop you want. The same is true for many things in life. So many people struggle to achieve greatness because they were not thinking about greatness in the proper season. So many students decide they want to get serious about their coursework at the end of the season, and typically that is too late. If you wait to find out which courses you need for your transcript when you are already a junior in high school, there is a good possibility you will not have enough time left to take the courses necessary to gain entrance into college.

When you have an idea, you must take the time to sit down
and create an action plan to make it happen. This plan must contain goals with action items and due dates. Without due dates, your goals on the paper are just ideas. The due dates place a written demand on you to produce results by a set time. If you want to take it one step further, use technology. Use your calendar on your smartphone or tablet to create to-do lists and set alarms and reminders. I had to learn this lesson the hard way. By not writing things down, I would rely on my memory (bad) or the Holy Spirit (missed Him too), and consequently I missed some great opportunities.

I frequently recall that during and after Katrina, I thanked God that my husband had a plan for our family. He was very clear on when to leave the city and where to go, even though I had originally wanted to wait out the storm on the second floor of the house. Immediately after the storm, his emotions and compassion kicked in, which was admirable, and he went to several cities, comforting the people. Eventually, though, he heard God tell him to settle down and feed His sheep. He had gone to Houston, Memphis, and Baton Rouge, but God said Atlanta and New Orleans were to be his focus, even though our home was destroyed in New Orleans.

Our children and grandchildren were with us in Atlanta, staying with different friends and spiritual family members. We had no permanent place to stay, but we were happy. We were being encouraged and blessed by them each day. As the plan fully unfolded, we could see the hand of God. A few weeks after the storm, to reestablish a sense of normalcy, my husband and I leased an apartment. My eldest daughter and her family did the same, and we made sure we were near each other. Family support was very important to maintain. Simultaneously, we found a place to
jumpstart our ministry in Atlanta. We became one church in two states; God had enlarged our territory.

We plan in the natural realm as much as possible and ask God’s wisdom and blessings to be with us, but He can always override our plan to enlarge our territory. No need to try and convince anyone that it is a good plan. The proof is in the pudding. Believers were added to the new ministry weekly.

4. Enlist the tools and people you need (if applicable) to assist in executing the plan.

Now that you have a plan, you need to build a team to help you manifest it.

This team should fill your gaps. You don’t need a team of people who are just like you and think just like you. That will not help you. In fact, it will only frustrate you in the long run. It may be fun in the beginning because you agree with each other, but it turns into a challenge when a ball gets dropped in an area where you are both weak. You must staff your weaknesses and not your strengths. This is a major key that you really cannot grasp until you are mature. When you are immature, you want familiarity, and you may fear others will get the credit for the success of your plan. However, when you are mature, you are comfortable with situations and people who are different from you. As you mature and prepare to really go after success in a serious way, you make sure you have every single item and team member you need.

In *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*, John C. Maxwell wrote about Law #3, the Law of the Niche, which says that each person on a team needs to be chosen carefully for their particular position based on their strengths and qualifications. In order to
do that, you must be able to accurately assess your team. Having that knowledge is great, but you then must have the wisdom to correctly position each member to maximize their strengths and eclipse their deficiencies. The goal is to set up each team member for success. All “dream teams” are built with the team members’ strengths and weaknesses in mind. It should be a win-win for all parties involved.

Never set yourself or a member of your team up for failure by putting demands on a skill that is lacking. Many times I’ve found that it is difficult to help others deal with their weaknesses. However, we must care enough not to want to see them fail (although sometimes that’s the only way they will grow). As a teacher in life, you must learn to gently but still forcefully massage them into their right place. It’s like a good massage therapist who digs in to those tight areas to loosen the muscles so they can work properly. It hurts, but after the massage, you may be sore but you definitely feel better. You think, That was good pain! Through your help, your team members will discover their “sweet spot.”

5. Make prayer or meditation and physical exercise a part of your recovery.

The truth is you will thrive after tragedy much faster by making these a part of your weekly routine, and I recommend incorporating them in that order.

Prayer is important. Taking time to talk to God, and to listen to what He wants to tell you, is so crucial. It is a two-way conversation, figuratively speaking. Psalm 145:18 says, “The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth” (KJV). He is waiting to hear from you. He already knows the truth about you, but He wants you to tell Him that truth.
Once you talk to Him in truth, He speaks truth back to you. Don’t do all of the talking. Speak to Him and wait for a response. He says in the Word, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10 kjv). Additionally, reading your Bible and allowing the Word to minister to you is critical because many times He speaks to us directly through His Word.

Now, if you are skeptical or new to prayer, you should create a time for quiet and peaceful meditation. You can find an isolated location and get away from your emails, calls, and responsibilities. Create opportunities for your mind to reset.

Jesus was very close to the family of Lazarus and his two sisters. Once when Jesus was visiting, Martha was working hard around the house and was annoyed that Mary was not helping her but was instead sitting at Jesus’ feet. In response to Martha’s complaint, Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41–42 kjv).

This is such a powerful lesson for life. Mary was sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening. Many people hear but do not have good listening skills. We must discipline ourselves to slow down and sit down to get divine direction from God. I’m sure you’ve discovered by now that you don’t have all the answers. You don’t have the whole plan, so open yourself to listen to the one who has the missing pieces to make your plan work. Now you are #winning.

After prayer, I highly recommend that you get serious about exercise or increasing your physical activity. Studies show that sitting for long periods of time is so harmful some companies have invested in desks that workers use standing up. I watched a TED talk where an executive officer requires her teams to have
walking meetings. The team has the meeting walking across their business campus. It helps with attentiveness, creativity, and overall health. Pre-Katrina at a doctor’s visit, I asked my doctor for his opinion on why the number of cancer cases has increased in the world. From his thirty years of practicing medicine, he felt that lack of exercise was one of the most significant factors. Shocked, I asked, “Not poor nutrition?” He said diet was significant too, but more so was the lack of exercise.

That conversation changed my life, and I then decided to share his advice with others. So if you really want to see an improvement in your overall well-being, you should also consider adjusting your exercise and nutrition habits. You will find yourself feeling better, moving faster, and thinking more clearly. All these things are necessary if you want to achieve a greater level of maturity. Now that I have given you some tools to help you grow and mature, let’s talk about finding strength in the storm’s aftermath.

**Storm Playbook Study**

**Chapter Summary**

- Don’t just go through the storm. Grow through it.
- Often storms repeat in our lives when we do not learn important lessons from them the first time.
- Three areas where storms can reoccur are relationships, finances, and parenting; these storms create pathways for maturity.
- Storms are often preceded by warnings. Be sure to heed them.
Journaling

1. In what ways have you matured because of the storms in your life? In what area(s) do you still need to grow?

2. Which of the recovery steps do you most need to work on? How and when will you begin incorporating it into your life?

Storm Survivor: Queen Esther

The story of Queen Esther is one of my favorite stories of thriving after a storm. She was an orphan girl, raised by her cousin, Mordecai. Xerxes, the king at that time, was humiliated by his wife, who refused to come out and show her beauty to his intoxicated friends. At his friends’ urging, she was dismissed as queen, lest she influence other wives to be disobedient. However, it was the will of God to get Esther into the position of queen.

At the recommendation of her cousin, Esther entered the contest to select a new queen. Among all the contestants, Esther found favor with the caretaker of the contestants and was chosen by the king. Months after she became queen, she was facing a storm.

Esther received word that Mordecai was reportedly sitting outside the castle in a sackcloth. When Esther inquired what was wrong, he sent her a message saying that Haman, one of the king’s men, had a plan to kill all the Jews and requesting that she entreat the king to save them.

“All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the
gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”

When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” (Est. 4:11–16)

Just in case you are not familiar with the story of Esther (spoiler alert), she does not perish. As a matter of fact, not only are Esther and Mordecai’s people saved, but the king executes justice on Haman, the villain of this story.

Esther is a great example of fighting fear and walking by faith during a stormy situation. Although Esther was a young queen, she was forced to mature and take action quickly. Her people were in danger, and the only way she could help would put her own life at risk. In spite of facing death, she went before the king, made her requests known, and set forth a plan to also eliminate the man who was a threat to her people.

There are storms in our lives that we face as the result of harm done to us by others. This story reminds us that vengeance is action best left to God. He can vindicate us better than we can
vindicate ourselves. Esther’s victory makes me think of a Storm Song that I would like you to find and download on your favorite musical platform.

**Storm Song**

“Reckless Love” by Cory Asbury

My favorite line is, “There’s no lie you won’t tear down coming after me.” At some point in your life, you will face an injustice. Just know that we serve a God who exposes evil and vindicates His righteous children.

**Memory Verse**

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

—1 Corinthians 13:11