

I N T R O D U C T I O N



IN THE MIDDLE OF
A CATEGORY 5

HURRICANE

In the midst of the storm it's difficult to know when you heard the first thunderclap. For me, it was sometime during the summer of 2004.

Our church was growing rapidly toward and beyond the 10,000 attendance mark and we had undertaken a very ambitious ministry/facility expansion. More than twenty million dollars had been pledged, and we planned to spend almost double that amount building a camp and starting a new K-12 Christian school. We had also begun erecting a 300,000 square foot worship complex on our newest campus.

During this time our radio ministry, "Walk in the Word," was growing into an exciting partnership with a popular out-of-state ministry, bringing explosive growth and impact. I was writing books, launching a revival ministry attended by thousands in arenas around the country, and my wife and I were enjoying our three teenage children.

Looking back, I should have checked into a mental hospital for allowing all that to go on at once. It's not like people didn't try to warn me, it's

just that I knew God was bigger than all the challenges and I was blindly intent on “seizing the opportunity.”

I’m not sure when we heard the first rumble of thunder, but sometime during the summer of 2004 my wife and I sailed into a gale that became over three years a storm and finally a category 5 hurricane. “Landfall” for the hurricane would come in late 2007.

Our oldest son broke his neck in a serious car accident and came within a hair’s width of death. For several months we would take Luke back and forth to doctors in his skull-piercing metal “halo,” continuing to pray that his blood supply would get to the remote area in his neck. For most people, such a condition seldom heals without surgery—surgery in the vocal region that would imperil his gift of leading worship.

At the same time, a wonderful treasure of a young man in our church was gone from this earth in a moment. The news of Mitch’s tragic drowning came to his parents when my wife and I were with them. They are among our closest friends, and our shared grief was beyond description. I will neither forget that night nor the days, weeks, and months that followed such an earth-shattering loss.

Soon, one of the founding elders of our church died and two other elders faced cancer in their families, one with a son, another with his wife.

Due to circumstances outside my direct control, our construction budget was over by \$20 million, staff had to be fired, and I was dragged into the middle of it all. Then irregularities in the structural steel halted work for seven months, requiring a multimillion dollar fix that was hard to configure and almost impossible to fund.

Millions of dollars of liens were placed on the stalled project, and dark clouds of bankruptcy loomed large over the entire ministry. Construction committee members resigned *en masse*. Night after night I walked alone through the incomplete worship facility. It felt more like a tomb than a church. As I walked I wondered how it had all come to this and what God’s possible purpose could be in making life so hard.

Then our radio ministry partnership began to struggle and finally dissolve in the disillusionment of failed relationships and broken promises. But soon a replacement partnership from another solid ministry appeared. Painfully, after several hopeful months, this also perished in a way that made the first breakup seem inconsequential and leaving the international teaching ministry we had built over ten years also teetering on the edge of financial ruin.

The revival ministry called “Downpour” blessed thousands through our partnership with such gifted teachers as Beth Moore and Crawford Loritts, but then it faded as fast as it had flourished as demands on the church-front made travel impossible for me. During this season several of our key staff leaders left for a variety of good and not so good reasons; I could hardly blame them, as I was also casting about wondering if God would give me an exit ramp from this onslaught. Just as one trial, such as getting our church building done, would end, we would launch into another such as the national economy collapsing.

The hurricane had blown ashore, and everywhere we saw the storm’s onslaught. The term *shell-shocked* would have been an understatement.

During this same season family issues at home took my understanding of despair to a level I could never have conceived. I learned the meaning of lying on my face and pooling my tears as I cried out to God. David’s plea became very real to me: **“My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’”** (Psalm 42:3).

Does that sound like enough trials? I certainly thought so as I pored over the Psalms and joined their pleading prayers for relief. Apparently God wanted us to experience a category 5 hurricane, because by the fall of 2008 I discovered that my lifetime of continual physical health had been eclipsed by prostate cancer.

That news rocked me to the core. Then came the devastating news my mother, the greatest source of prayer and blessing for Kathy and me, was diagnosed with a terminal disease that silenced her voice and slowed her

pace to a near standstill. Now the hurricane smashed inland. Yes, life was hard. Very hard!

Where do you go at a time like this? How can you make sense from such a cascade of calamity? I hope you never have to find out; but I *did* have to.

Over Thanksgiving I researched my treatment options and chose a regimen of proton radiation therapy at Loma Linda University Medical Center in California. People kept asking about my cancer, but to be frank, my biggest burdens by far, were not physical. I needed some help and I needed it fast. I began to search the New Testament for what God had to say about trials. Not as an academic or a person called to feed the faith of others, but as a desperate soul crying out for some rain to soften the soil, for some nourishment to fill my hungry heart, for something, anything, to help me find my way out of the wasteland I once called a life.

I distanced myself from everyone, afraid of the pain of explaining how I was doing. Friends were leaving me alone—it was just me and God with my Bible open and a faithful praying wife standing, as always, by my side.

Loma Linda is 1,986 miles away from our kids and church family and the treatment required eleven weeks. Our church leaders were surprised I agreed to fill the pulpit of my dear friend Greg Laurie, pastor of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, California. I agreed to give six messages while in California, not because I couldn't be away from preaching, not because I could use the content in my own church by video, but because I was fearful of the impact of delaying my desperate need for biblical answers. Greg was enduring his own crucible in the sudden death of his firstborn son, and for that reason we were both very thirsty to learn what God has to say about crushing times in the lives of His children.

It was not the cancer treatment alone that made this time so difficult but the culmination of all that we had been seeking to endure. Every day for ten weeks it was pretty much the same schedule: cancer treatments in the morning and then deeply into God's Word in the afternoons to feed my own weary soul. Then weekly I would get up and preach what I was learn-

ing about what I was going through. Afterward I would try to rest for a day and then start the cycle again.

You can be sure that nothing shallow or superficial got into those messages. They were preached during a time of economic collapse and a transition to a new American president. I knew that people's hearts were hurting and hungering for nourishing insights for their own famished faith. The messages did end up being shown by video to our own church almost simultaneously. For that reason I felt the pressure of almost 25,000 people between our two churches looking for, even demanding answers for what they themselves were facing.

What God gave me during those weeks has changed my life, two churches, and countless other lives since that time. You now hold the written version in your hands. If life has been hard for you recently, maybe harder than you ever dreamed or thought possible, you are in the right place.

Week by week I was like the farmer in the field bringing the crops in and putting them on the table for supper that night. Everything delivered was fresh from the field. I was living it and still am to a great extent. And I'll be honest with you, some days are better than others. If you're in a trial right now, you know all about that, too.

When a hurricane blows into *your* life, you have to do more than hide behind boarded windows or flee to higher ground. My Scripture study uncovered powerful answers. When life is hard, we can learn much about who God is and how to access His strength. If you realize you cannot endure much longer—if you fear the strong gusts rattling your windows right now—I get it. And I can't wait to share with you what the Lord has revealed to me . . .