

GROWING FROM DISASTER

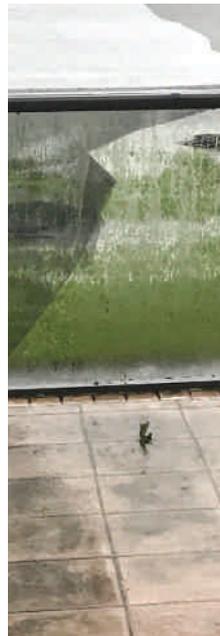
Hurricanes, Floods & Conversion

By Morgan Smith

Over the years, I have come to concretely understand a lot of the Psalms. The crying out during times of pain and trial, the way God hears me and rescues me, and then the inevitable urge to give thanks after being saved and changed: these are the marks of true conversion. I can see, and have verified by my own experience, that conversion grows out of trials, pain and suffering. The theme of crying out, having hope of being saved, and being saved permeates the Psalms, as well as my daily life.

Psalm 69 comes to mind when I think of the past couple of years. Never before has my family been struck with so many trials: one right after the other. We have been shaken to the core. And, yet, we are being healed in a way that is truly beautiful and truly unique to us. Out of these trials, we have become closer, more prayerful, more faithful and more certain that God listens to our prayers and comes to us daily in the reality of our lives.

Save me, God,
for the waters have reached my neck.
I have sunk into the mire of the deep,
where there is no foothold.
I have gone down to the watery depths;
the flood overwhelms me.
I am weary with crying out;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail,
from looking for my God.
But I will pray to you, LORD,
at a favorable time.
God, in your abundant kindness, answer me
with your sure deliverance.
—Psalm 69:2-4





THE HURRICANE

In the late summer of 2017, Hurricane Irma was looming off the coast of Florida. My mother was alone in our family home, my father having gone up to Wisconsin for business. My parents had retired (dad still very much involved in his Wisconsin-based businesses) to Florida. They had owned their home there for only a year, and had not even become acclimated into the neighborhood.

My mom called me one evening very scared. She was terrified because there was news of Hurricane Irma changing course and heading over to her area, the Gulf Coast, rather than to the east coast. I was not taking her very seriously. “Oh, it’ll be ok,” I said. “I lived through two hurricanes when I lived in Florida, and the worst that happened was the power was



out for awhile and the gas lines were long—no big deal.” She said, “No, listen, this is a big storm, a once-in-a-lifetime type storm. They say it will wipe out all of Fort Myers Beach and even inland.” The tone of her voice forced me to take her seriously and a chill ran up my back. I looked up the weather in her area, and sure enough, this was a big one.

My dad and I felt helpless. We were safe up north, and she was alone facing a hurricane in Florida. However, shortly, we learned that she was not alone at all, thank God. My brother drove over from the east coast to be with her, and there were others in the neighborhood that were staying home. So, they hunkered down, having stocked up on water and supplies.

I reflected upon all that would be lost in the storm. Some of my favorite parks, buildings I know well and people’s homes. I sent out very urgent prayer requests to my lay fraternity group, to other friends and a religious order I know well. My dad surprised me a bit when he said he was praying very hard and asking people to pray as well (I had never really heard him say anything like that before).

Areas half a mile away from my parent’s house were all evacuated, and eventually there was a call to evacuate their neighborhood. But, there was nowhere to go at this point. All hotels further north were booked, and the highways were jammed or closed. My mom and brother talked to some of the other neighbors, and they all decided to stay and wait through it. She had never even met these neighbors before, and now here they were all talking about how to prevent very serious things, like

flooding, disaster and even death.

I watched the weather helplessly, and I waited for my mom’s phone updates. She would call and let me know what was happening from time to time. They were predicting a storm surge of 15 feet, meaning the houses in her neighborhood would certainly get flooded by a huge wall of water. My mom and brother shuttered up the windows and doors—all except for one door in the back. They got into an interior hallway with two mattresses, one against the garage door to prevent the water from rushing in, and the other to block them from flying glass.

During the eye of the storm, my brother went outside to see what was happening. He noticed that the pond behind the house was so flooded that it was all the way up to the porch screen. He began to pull together palm fronds that had blown off the trees from our yard and the neighbor’s yards. My mom went out to see where he went. Taken aback, she asked him what he was doing. He said, “They build roofs out of these things! I am going to use them to block the water.” He then layered them up against the screen, three feet high on all sides.

After the second half of the storm came through, the water was very high. The palm fronds had saved the back of the house from flooding. The storm changed direction at the last minute, and a miracle occurred. There was damage, but not to the extent that they had predicted.

My mom became very close with the neighbors that weathered the storm with her. There were many instances of them helping each other with various problems that came up during



and after the storm. My mom started having the family across the street over, and she became very close with them. She went from barely knowing anyone in the neighborhood, to becoming dear and close friends with the families there. The miracle that occurred was twofold: the damage was less than expected, and the community came together to help each other, becoming closer in the process. “Friendship grew out of disaster,” my mom said about it.

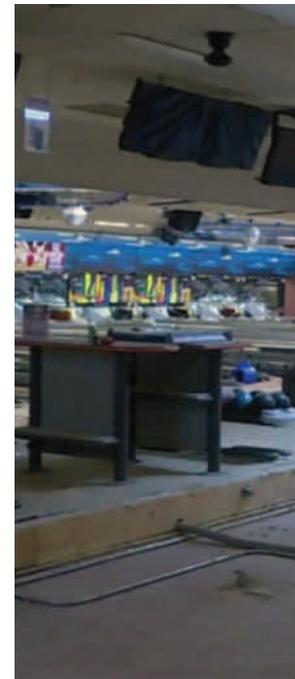
From this experience, my family became certain, in a very concrete way, that prayers work—and that good can come from terrifying and trying experiences.

Do not let the flood waters overwhelm me,
nor the deep swallow me,
nor the pit close its mouth over me.
Answer me, LORD, in your generous love;
in your great mercy turn to me.
That I may praise God’s name in song
and glorify it with thanksgiving.
—Psalm 69:16-17

THE FLOOD

We would need to hold onto what we had learned about prayer, hope and miracles for the event that occurred almost one year later.

One evening, late last summer, I got a nervous and urgent phone call from my mom. She was asking me to pray, and pray hard, for one of our family’s businesses in Wisconsin. (My dad has owned bowling centers, mostly in rural Wisconsin towns, since 1972: bowling is our family business. My dad worked very hard and built his business up from scratch. We have all worked hard in the business in one way or another, and my brother helps run the company.) My mom and dad were visiting Wisconsin, when a torrential rainstorm came through and flooded one of the bowling centers, the one that also housed our central office. Mom was calling me as it was happening. Water was rushing in through the foundation, the back retention pond, and eventually the storm sewers overflowed. The water was waist high. Water was rushing in so fast, that the police forced everyone to leave—there was nothing that could be done, and they had to





give up trying to stop it. My brother said it was a very helpless feeling and difficult to leave. So, once again, I urgently called upon my group of friends for prayers.

It was a freak occurrence. This part of town was not in a floodplain and not directly near any large bodies of water, like rivers or lakes, yet the flood took out many local businesses. Our place was one of the worst hit. My mom, dad and brother, including the managers and staff, were able to go back into the building the next day. The water was high, but it was draining with pumps. My mom recalled, “Everything was floating, bowling pins were floating everywhere.” It was estimated that there was one and a half million dollars in damage, and the insurance would not (and did not) cover any of it. Devastating.

Everybody (managers, staff, bankers and even customers) thought that my dad would walk away from it. After all, he was 69 years old and semi-re-



tired, why would he take on such a lost cause? They were all surprised when he said, “Of course we’re going to rebuild, we will come out of this, and we will be stronger than ever.” Following that, there was an outpouring of help and support. My dad got a loan to help with the cost, and all of the staff, as well as staff from his other bowling centers, and even customers came to help clean up the damage. My dad was so moved: he tried to pay the customers for their help, but all of them refused, saying they just wanted to see it open again. The community really came together to rebuild.

When league bowling opened in the winter, we were surprised that no one had left: the leagues either extended their seasons later, or went to another place until we re-opened (another bowling center offered to host the leagues temporarily until we could rebuild). The business is now thriving, even more than before.

Like the summer before, a two-fold miracle occurred: the business fully recovered, and the community came together to help—growing together in the process. I think my dad, through that disaster, was given what he needed at the time. He does not want to retire, and finds it difficult to step away from his life’s work. He also finds it especially difficult to step away from all of the people he has come to know over the years. He believes in building community—it is the core of his businesses—and he has done this since his be-

ginnings. I think he needed to know, concretely, that his work has amounted to something—that his work did bring the community together. Not only that, but there was an outpouring of love and support for him personally that touched him very deeply. I think in this time (a difficult time for a man like him, a man who lives for his work), he needed to know that he is loved and that what he built will stand for years to come.

For the LORD hears the poor,
and does not spurn those in bondage.
Let the heaven and the earth praise him,
the seas and whatever moves in them!”
For God will rescue Zion,
and rebuild the cities of Judah.
They will dwell there and possess it;
the descendants of God’s servants will inherit it;
those who love God’s name will dwell in it.
—Psalm 69:34-37

THE CONVERSION

Starting from the faith that grew out of these two experiences, we as a family, have been able to “weather” all kinds of trials. Our conversions and increased trust in prayer have brought us closer together and helped us through even more than we could have imagined. From my family’s experiences, I can see how God uses difficult circumstances to help us and give us what we need, and prayer to Him, crying out to Him, is critical, along with the hope that He will save us. We are closest to Him when we know we need His mercy. It may sound strange, but I am thankful for the trials that have happened to me and my family, because I see the good that has come from them.