

SECTION 1

DISCOVERING GOD'S PURPOSES IN THE MIDST OF CRISIS

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD,
"plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope
and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and
pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when
you seek me with all your heart.*

JEREMIAH 29:11-13

*When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you...
ISAIAH 43:2A*

*The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the
LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind
tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the
LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the
LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the
LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.*

1 KINGS 19:11-12

HEARING GOD IN THE MIDST OF THE STORM

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INTRODUCTION

The New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary is one of the world's leading providers of quality theological education, training over 3,000 students annually. With a focus upon training students for practical ministry, the institution offers a number of courses designed to prepare students to minister within some of life's toughest situations. Theology courses challenge students to wrestle with tough issues like the problem of evil—how a loving, just God can allow suffering to occur. In pastoral ministry courses, students are exposed to troubling situations that can severely damage a church, and address issues related to ministering to families in crisis or who are suffering the loss of a loved one. Through courses on counseling, students learn how to help people deal with some of life's most difficult circumstances. These practical emphases enable the seminary to produce highly skilled and qualified ministers—men and women who are ready and able to face any difficult ministerial situation that may confront them.

With all the faculty and resources of one of the largest accredited seminaries in North America, it might seem that the seminary's students should be prepared for any situation or challenge in which they might find themselves. However, that was before the storm. When Hurricane Katrina's storm surge crumpled New Orleans' levee protection system on August 29, 2005, the seminary campus, the homes of many students, faculty, and staff, and ultimately 80 percent of the city of New Orleans were inundated with water. This cataclysmic disaster confronted the seminary and its faculty with a difficult situation, the likes of which no seminary course had provided adequate preparation. Indeed, the faculty members who had been instructing students in how to maneuver through and provide leadership in the midst of life's trying circumstances found themselves in what would prove to be perhaps the most difficult situation they themselves had ever faced.

As God so often does, He used the difficult circumstances of life to teach the various members of the seminary community important lessons—some of which were more personal or individual, while others concerned all the members of the seminary family and the entire Gulf region. Many of these were lessons the participants knew in an intellectual sense, but God used the circumstances of the storm to teach them in such a deep way as to become more real and more clearly understood than never before. These lessons became more than just spiritual platitudes or pietistic slogans. What follows are the simple stories of three seminary faculty members who had God teach them—in this intense, experiential way—an important lesson through the trials of the storm. Perhaps these lessons cannot be grasped to the depth that these faculty members experienced them without actually living through a major crisis. Recounting these stories, however, may convey to you these experiences in such a way as to allow you to begin to view these truths with a deeper appreciation for their real meaning.

DR. KRISTYN CARVER'S STORY

Dr. Kristyn Carver serves at the seminary as an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Counseling. Having taught at the seminary full time since 2003, Dr. Carver is both a talented educator in the classroom and an experienced, licensed counselor. In addition to her teaching responsibilities at the institution, she also has a private counseling practice and serves as Director of Casa Hope, a Christian counseling center located in Cutoff, Louisiana. Dr. Carver and her husband, Kim, live in a stately, historic home in the 2700 block of Carrollton Avenue, in the heart of New Orleans.

Having been born and raised in Baton Rouge, Kristyn has always been mindful of hurricanes and the kind of threat they pose to southern Louisiana, yet Katrina came as something of a surprise. In fact, the Carvers did not realize a hurricane was threatening the city until the Friday night before the storm. While at a local bookstore, they overheard several people discussing a coming storm and possible evacuation plans. Upon returning home, they turned on the news and realized that New Orleans was indeed threatened by this approaching storm named Katrina. Yet, they did not panic or begin to make immediate preparations. Having lived through so many storm threats that always seemed to miss New Orleans, they were not too concerned. In fact, they continued to watch the news reports Saturday morning, but did not actually leave until later in the day.

Late in the afternoon on Saturday, August 27, the Carvers locked up their home, boarded up the front window, and evacuated to her parent's house in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Like everyone else in New Orleans, they expected to return to their home on Tuesday or Wednesday, so they only packed a couple of days worth of casual clothes. In fact, rather than trying to chase down and pack up her uncle's cat, which she was pet-sitting, Kristyn put out extra food and locked the cat in the house, thinking she would be back in two days.

It took them over seven hours to complete the seventy-mile journey. They, like thousands of other residents of the city and surrounding areas, were stuck in the gridlock of bumper-to-bumper traffic as everyone attempted evacuate in the face of the coming storm. After finally arriving in Baton Rouge late Saturday night, the Carvers waited restlessly as the storm approached. When Katrina made landfall, the strong winds knocked out the electrical power throughout Southeastern Louisiana, including large portions of the Baton Rouge area. Finding themselves without electricity, the Carvers sought information from and about New Orleans from the only power source they could find, their car radio. Sitting in the car, listening to the initial reports, it appeared as if the city had successfully weathered the storm without major incident. On Tuesday, August 30, they ventured to the student center at LSU (which had both electricity and air conditioning) where they were able to plant themselves on a couch and watch the television footage documenting a city under water.

The Carvers were hopeful that their home might be spared, especially since they knew that their house was raised about four feet above the street level. While not seeing their house specifically on the television, they did see helicopter footage of areas near their home. They watched people from their neighborhood wade through waist-deep water, so it seemed as if their house might be just high enough to have remained dry.

However, when the news coverage began to show pictures of a huge fire, which was consuming a whole city block on Carrollton Avenue, they feared that everything they owned had been lost. Within minutes of the news showing images of the fire, friends and family began frantically trying to call the Carvers to tell them the news. Although they could not clearly identify their house because of the fire, smoke, and unsteady nature of the helicopter camera, the Notre Dame Seminary, which sits across the street from their home, was not hard to miss. For the next three weeks, the Carvers lived thinking that their house had initially survived the flood only to burn to the ground.

When the city finally opened their section of town and allowed residents to return for the first time, Kim ventured into New Orleans in order to inspect the house—or whatever might be left of it. When he arrived, he was shocked to see that the house was still standing. It had been the homes on the adjacent block which had burned down. Furthermore, the floodwater had risen to the level of the porch, but it had not risen high enough to enter the house. Thus from the outside it seemed as if the Carvers had been graciously and miraculously spared any flood or fire damage.

Unfortunately, the interior of the house told a different story. Because the house had been just high enough to avoid the floodwater (and had not burned), it had been broken into, lived in, ransacked, and looted. Kim found food and trash littered throughout the house. Over 150 used water bottles were spread throughout every room of the house. All of the pillows, linens, and towels were missing (along with the silverware, jewelry, clothing, and money). In addition, the home had suffered roof and rainwater damage to the second floor. The damage was of such a nature that the Carvers were not able to live in the home until January 2006.

In the wake of such trying circumstances, Dr. Carver initially attempted to employ her counseling skills and help a group of New Orleans evacuees at a Red Cross shelter in Baton Rouge, just down the street from her parent's house. At the time, experienced, licensed counselors were both needed and in extremely short supply. On the Wednesday after the storm she went to the shelter and quickly became overwhelmed. She explained, "I had gone to the shelter to try and help and I just realized very quickly that I was not stable enough—there were still too many unknowns in my own life for me to be effective in helping people with their unknowns. And so it was several weeks before I was actually able to go into shelters or begin to work with people again." Reflecting on that experience, she concluded that "When it is your occupation to help people who are hurting it is hard to figure out what to do when you are hurting too. You feel this burden for other people but you are not exactly in a place where you can really help." Her own sense of loss and uncertainty diminished her ability to help other evacuees deal with their issues.

Today, some two years later, Dr. Carver believes the experience has made her a stronger counselor, able to identify with many of the stresses with which her New Orleans based clientele deal. The experience left her with a profound understanding of the need for a care-giver or minister to take care of themselves—mentally and spiritually—before they attempt to help others. Dr. Carver learned anew that being a minister does not make you immune from the difficulties and trials of life. When trials come, caregivers must address their own condition before attempting to help others.

DR. PRESTON NIX'S STORY

Dr. Preston Nix officially began his employment with the seminary on August 1, 2005. Dr. Nix had spent the previous two decades serving as the pastor of several growing churches. Hiring Dr. Nix was no small victory for the seminary administration. Dr. Nix is a very gifted preacher and experienced minister who had rebuffed efforts by a sister seminary to coax him into the world of academia. Generally speaking, hiring someone with Dr. Nix's skill set and pastoral experience is a very difficult task for a seminary as most experienced pastors do not want to make the transition from the local church to the academic world. Even though Dr. Nix agreed to meet with the seminary administration, it was more out of courtesy than a desire to accept any seminary position. He was serving in his eleventh year as the pastor of Eastwood Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma and he had no intention of actually leaving his church to go to the seminary.

However, as he heard what the seminary was looking for someone to teach preaching and evangelism classes and oversee the supervised ministry program, he realized that the seminary's needs coincided perfectly with his own loves and desires. It was as if the job had been created and tailored especially for him. This created quite a dilemma as Preston struggled to identify God's will regarding the seminary position. Indeed, toward the end of the interview process he was still not sure what God wanted him to do. As he prayed, seeking some direction before he gave the seminary a final answer regarding whether or not he would come, the Lord directed him to Isaiah 30:21

Your ears will hear a word behind you, "This is the way, walk in it," whenever you turn to the right or to the left.

Nix recalled, "This is the way, walk ye. That is really what helped sustain me, because I had a clear word from his word, this is the way, come this way, you walk this way. He opened up every door." Although he did not know it at the time, this direction he received from the Lord, which led him to come to New Orleans, would ultimately sustain him and protect him from doubting that decision during the year that would follow. Having received the direction he was seeking, Dr. Nix accepted the position at the seminary and resigned the pastorate that he had held for over a decade. During the first week of August, he and his family packed up all of their belongings and moved to live in a faculty home located on the seminary campus.

The entire month of August was a time of extreme transition for the Nix family. Preston was adjusting to life as a professor, where the authority one wields is significantly different from that of a pastor. He was struggling to prepare syllabi, write lectures, and plan for the classes he would be teaching. Diane and the children were having to adjust from being the "pastor's wife" and the "pastor's kids" to just being "another" faculty family. Added to this transition in roles, they were all getting accustomed to a new life in New Orleans, a very old city with a unique culture which is quite unlike Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Although the Nix family had dealt with the threat of tornados back in Tulsa, they had no experience whatsoever when dealing with hurricanes. When Katrina turned toward

New Orleans and they heard the mayor and newscasters recommend immediate evacuation, they decided to leave the city. Having just moved, they were still in the process of unpacking thus many of their belongings, especially those sentimental items which were not used on a daily basis, were still in boxes. They searched through the boxes and found a photo album full of their wedding pictures and some pictures of the children, which they placed in their van. They only packed four days worth of clothes, thinking like everyone else that they would be returning to the campus in a few days. Leaving his car in the driveway, they loaded everyone (including the family dog) into their van and began to make their way out of town.

The family headed east to Panama City, Florida, where a relative owned a beachfront condominium on the 13th floor of a high-rise unit. When Katrina came ashore, she was so large her effects were felt in Panama City, some 300 miles from New Orleans. The Nix family was glued to the television, watching the weather channel as fierce winds and rain beat against the condo windows. It was at that point that Preston began to worry about the status of his house and the seminary campus. If the winds were that strong in Panama City, he shuddered to think what the full force of the hurricane was doing to New Orleans. Those fears were realized on Tuesday when the family watched the news coverage in horror as they saw the city of New Orleans engulfed in floodwaters. Having only lived in New Orleans for a few weeks, Preston was not familiar enough with the city to recognize all of the areas being shown and referenced on the news coverage. Preston was however relatively sure that the seminary and the house they had occupied for less than a month, were both inundated by the floodwaters.

One of the most difficult days for the Nix family was the day they were finally able to return to their home on the seminary campus in order to scavenge anything that might be salvaged. Due to the extensive level of flooding, the city did not allow anyone into the section of the city wherein the seminary is located for the first five weeks after the storm. Thus it was the first week of October before anyone was allowed into the Gentilly and Lakeview areas. The Nix's came back to their home prepared for the worst, with professional respirators and hazardous materials suits. When they opened the door to their home, they were immediately confronted with the horrible smell of mold, rot, and decay. Even though they were breathing through respirators, the smell within the house was nauseating and the scene was more than they had anticipated. With their home having taken on roughly five feet of water, they were only able to salvage a few items, all things which had been left on the second floor.

As bad as the inside of the house looked and smelled, the most devastating moment for Preston came when he opened the garage door and peered into the space. Preston's pride and joy had been a very extensive library built over the course of thirty years of ministry. Over one hundred and ten book boxes had been needed to transport the library from Tulsa to New Orleans. In fact, the professional movers had been forced to use a second truck exclusively for the library contents. The library had contained thousands of books, thirty years worth of bible study notes, sermons, and all of Preston's notes from seminary. The library had served as a tangible legacy of Preston's ministerial career. And yet more than that, it had been the foundation upon which he had intended to build his professorial career. The materials, which he had been collecting through 30 years of ministry, were going to guide and inform his teaching. The library was not only a link to his past, but was to provide for his immediate future as well.

When they had left the seminary campus, Preston's two car garage had been filled from floor to ceiling with the boxes of books, notes, and sermons. Now, some five weeks later, Preston saw the devastating effects that the toxic soup of flood water had wrought on this valuable collection of paper. The treasured library had been reduced to a mushy, moldy, rotting mound of pulp. None of the books, notes, or even the framed diplomas could be salvaged.

The loss of his library was a significant blow to Preston. As he struggled with the destruction and loss the storm left in its wake, he was brought to tears thinking about the loss of his library. It was within the struggle over the meaning of the library's loss that God imparted one of his most important lessons for Preston. Preston explained, "This is what I heard, I want you to depend totally upon me. Now, I didn't know all that meant, but I just knew it meant trust. When I looked up to heaven and asked, why did I have to lose my library? Not defiantly, but really struggling—Why did I have to lose my library? I want you to trust totally on me, depend totally. That is what I heard from the Lord. I bowed my head and started crying . . . So, I learned to trust in Him."

Two years removed from the loss of his library, Preston has managed to become a successful classroom educator, training the ministers of the future. Dr. Nix is busy teaching freshly prepared material and preaching newly crafted sermons. He lost the collection of thirty years worth of research, but in the process, Preston learned more of what it truly means to depend solely on God.

DR. JEANINE BOZEMAN'S STORY

Dr. Jeanine Bozeman first came to the seminary in 1967 when her husband, Welby Bozeman, began his graduate studies. At that time Jeanine was working as a social worker in the public school system. They originally only intended to stay in New Orleans for one year, but they fell in love with the city—its culture, food, and people—and decided to stay long-term. Welby accepted the call to pastor the First Baptist Church of Chalmette, Louisiana and thus the Bozemans have remained in Louisiana ever since. After earning a master's degree in Social Work from Tulane University, Jeanine enrolled in the seminary and earned both the M.R.E. and Ph.D. degrees from the seminary. In 1985, she was hired to teach social work at the seminary. Over the course of her twenty plus years of service, she was eventually promoted to chairperson of the Christian Education division. Dr. Bozeman is the only female to have served as a division chairperson in any of the six Southern Baptist seminaries. Recognized as the Outstanding Teacher of the Year in 2003, she is a much loved professor, an accomplished writer, and a highly sought after conference speaker. She currently serves as Senior Professor of Social Work.

The Bozemans' living situation prior to the storm was quite unique. They lived in one of the faculty townhouses on Iroquois street during the week, usually from Monday afternoon to Friday afternoon. On the weekends they would travel across Lake Pontchartrain to Covington, where they had purchased a home in which they intended to live full-time once Jeanine decided to retire from the seminary. On the Thursday prior to the hurricane, the Bozemans traveled from the seminary campus to Pineville, Louisiana

where Jeanine was booked to speak at a Sunday School Leadership conference. Immersed in her conference duties, she was completely unaware of the impending storm until a friend called on Saturday, urging them to get out of New Orleans immediately. Hoping to be able to return to their campus home, the Bozemans headed back to New Orleans but they only made it as far as their Covington house. The state police had already initiated the contra-flow evacuation procedures, converting all in-bound lanes of interstate and causeway traffic into out-bound lanes leaving the city. There was simply no physical way to cross the lake and return to New Orleans. Thus they were not able to pack, move items upstairs, or make any storm preparations for their campus home.

Having just come from Pineville on Saturday, the Bozemans evacuated back to Pineville on Sunday in order to escape the storm's fury. On Tuesday, one day after the storm, they returned to their Covington home, which had survived the storm with only minor damage. Even though they did not have electricity for nearly two weeks, they remained at their home in Covington. When they were finally able to return to the seminary campus during the first week of October, they were stunned and saddened by what they found. Everything on the first floor of their townhouse had been completely and utterly destroyed. As an only child, Jeanine had inherited a number of family heirlooms such as pictures, porcelain tea sets, and very old antique furniture. All of this was lost. As she reflected back upon that day, she noted "I think the saddest thing for me about that day, was when I piled everything up in the middle of the room, knowing it was just going to be thrown away and I just looked at it. I thought, 'My goodness, there is your life—all in a pile'."

Yet in the months that followed, Jeanine began to understand that her loss was greater than the material possessions which the flood had destroyed. As a "people person" who had spent her whole career at the seminary investing her life in the lives of others, she missed the relationships she had built as well as the relational nature of her teaching ministry. The neighbors who had lived next to her on the seminary campus were scattered to Atlanta, Georgia, Dallas, Texas, and Little Rock, Arkansas. The fellowship she treasured with faculty colleagues was torn asunder as the Katrina-induced diaspora scattered the faculty across ten different states. The tight knit community that had characterized the seminary prior to the storm was absolutely shattered.

Jeanine, who had always valued people and relationships, learned just how valuable those connections with people truly are. Jeanine explained, "It is the importance of people . . . we saw how quickly a group of people that you are very fond of can be totally removed from your life forever either by choice or by circumstances. This was a major disaster for a lot of people. A lot of the friends that we had in Chalmette—they are not there anymore. They are scattered from Picayune to Baton Rouge to who knows where. So the community of care that we knew—they are gone. They are not there."

Two years later, Dr. Jeanine Bozeman is sharing her many talents with the seminary community, although she no longer resides on the campus. Everyday she makes the trek across Lake Pontchartrain in order to invest her lives in her colleagues and students. Perhaps now more than ever, Jeanine has come to understand anew that loving people—and investing in relationships—is more important than anything else we might spend our energies doing.

CONCLUSION

Every person at the seminary during Katrina, whether faculty, staff, or student, has a unique hurricane story. All of us have experienced loss of one degree or another and we all have suffered and endured an upending of the order which typified our pre-Katrina lives. Indeed, our lives are and forever will be marked by the storm that has so neatly divided our consciousness into pre-Katrina and post-Katrina. And each of us, through the course of that hellacious year that followed the storm, learned important lessons about God, our relationship with him, and ultimately about ministering in the midst of turmoil, pain, grief, suffering, and trial.

One of those scripture passages that we all thought we understood before Katrina is James 1:2-4. James begins his epistle with the words

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

While few who lived through Katrina would be able to describe the events as joyful or joyous, we would all agree that Katrina was an intense testing of our faith. We not only endured, but through the painful process have been made more complete—more complete in our trust in God, more complete in our connection to each other, and more complete in our ministry. It was an extremely difficult lesson—one which we would not choose to ever endure again—yet, one through which God certainly taught us more than any seminary class ever did.