Introduction:

Over the past 12 months, the world has witnessed two devastating natural disasters: Hurricane Katrina and the South Asia tsunami. This past August, the level 3 hurricane named Katrina ravaged the Gulf coast, turning towns like Biloxi, Mississippi into piles of splintered rubble while New Orleans was flooded, causing the evacuation of over 500 thousand residents. An estimated 1,000 people perished in this disaster that is now considered the worst in United States history. Many expressed shock that something like this could happen in our country. Some grew angry at our government while others answered the personal call to make a difference in the victims’ lives. Perhaps most encouraging were the hundreds, if not thousands of churches that opened their doors to provide food and shelter for those in need. What a tremendous expression of God’s love! Praise God that we, as the church, have the resources to respond to the need.

Immediately, there were comparisons to what we saw from the South Asia tsunami that occurred just eight months earlier. The devastation appeared to be similar, but one difference was that the tsunami came without warning, leading to the death of nearly 200 times as many people as compared to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Another significant comparison between the two disasters is the vast amount of property damage lost in the US compared to the unprecedented loss of life suffered by the tsunami.

On the morning of December 26, 2004, a human tragedy of epic proportions struck the shores of South Asia. Beneath the Indian Ocean, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake generated a force greater than 2,000 atomic bombs (or the amount of energy that the entire United States uses in six months), sending a ripple of water that traveled at 500 miles per hour through the sea...until it approached land. Banda Aceh, the northeastern tip of the island Sumatra in Indonesia was the first target. The ripple slowed as it exchanged speed for mass, sucking the coastal waters out as far as half a mile. Some people actually ran out toward the sea, lured by the receding waters. What they then saw, to their horror, was a wall of water larger than they could have ever imagined, traveling at speeds estimated at more than 30 miles per hour. No one warned them of the coming tsunami. The shoreline was swallowed by the devastating force of the ocean, crashing over the beach and pouring into the streets of Banda Aceh. Once the waters quieted, and a toll was taken of the devastation, this tsunami was regarded as the largest loss of human life from any natural disaster in history.

It took only 15 minutes for the monster wave to reach Banda Aceh, but this catastrophe was repeated two hours later when it reached Sri Lanka and then India. In total, 13 countries suffered loss from the tsunami. Cars crumpled like tin cans, houses turned to rubble, but the greatest loss was the estimated 180,000 people killed, either crushed by the force of the wave or drowned by the water’s relentless grip. Immediately, scientists bemoaned the lack of an early warning system that could have alerted the people of these communities of the coming danger. Had they known, they could have fled to higher ground in plenty of time, averting the grave threat to their lives. Scientists say that those in danger would not have needed to travel any further than half of a mile to reach safety. If they had been warned, the loss of human life would have been a fraction of what it turned out to be. Instead, it will be remembered as one of the greatest tragedies of all time.

But, after the sea had settled, and the news crews had packed up and headed for home, another powerful wave – not water this time – moved through the islands and the shorelines, through the homes and the...
businesses, through the hearts and the minds of people. This “wave” was carried about by the Spirit of God, ministering through His people – the Church – as the message of hope, and love, and grace became real in the ministering hands and arms of the followers of Jesus Christ in those lands. Out of tragedy, our Lord raised up a mighty movement of redeeming love that continues to move throughout the region. Yet, what is the most astounding is that, in many of the towns and villages ravaged by the tsunami, the teachings of Christ were often violently opposed! But, where Satan had built his strongholds, God’s wave of grace and love just poured right in . . . bringing light to the darkness, and hope to those who had lost everything.

_In the midst of the tragedy caused by this tsunami, we are given a glimpse of just what God has always been doing: bringing the light of Christ to those whose lives are filled with spiritual darkness._

**Sermon Title: Storming the Strongholds**

**Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

Text Introduction: When Paul wrote these words to the believers in Thessalonica, they were living in a world that was not fundamentally different from ours today. Sure, they didn’t have drive-thrus, IPods, or TIVO! But, they did have sin, tragedy, and all the confusion and anxiety that came with it. We do not have to think too hard for examples of that in our own lives. And we know that’s what the victims of the tsunami in South Asia are experiencing too. The believers in Thessalonica lived in a broken world, just as we do!

Paul’s message to them has a direct and critical application for us as well:

1. **Judgment Day is Coming! vs. 1-3**

   We don’t talk about this much anymore. Perhaps this is because so many jokes and stories have made fun of those who used to preach “hellfire and brimstone.” Few today want to be known for that! But, while the topic has surely been abused, it is still true that Christ is coming back one day, and we’d all better be ready. For the people in South Asia, it must have felt like Judgment Day when the tsunami came crashing into their villages. Do you think they were prepared to face their Creator?

   **A. For some, its coming will be tragic:**

   In some ways, Paul’s description here of the Day of the Lord reads like a news story about those who were caught by the tsunami. One moment they were vacationing, swimming in the water, enjoying the warmth of the sun . . . and the next they were facing one of the most powerful forces ever known! They had little if any time to make a last minute decision for Christ. (Use 1 Thessalonians 5:3 as a spiritual parallel).

   **B. For believers, our response is much different:**

   Paul knew that the Thessalonians were true followers of Christ. For them, and for us, the news that Judgment Day is coming brings a very different response.

   Imagine that you were in Sri Lanka just days before the tsunami, and somehow you were given certain knowledge that the tsunami was going to hit in a matter of days. What would you have done? I know exactly what you would have done; You would have spent your time warning those who were going to be in danger! You would have been a one-person early warning system.
Transition: This is just what Paul told the Thessalonian believers, and it is his message to us as well. All around us are those whose lives are in danger, and we have been given the message by which that danger can be turned into deliverance. We know the tragedy that awaits those who do not proclaim Christ as Savior. We have been given advanced knowledge of what is to come. Our responsibility as believers is to be the spiritual early warning system for those living outside of God’s family.

We have been given a great privilege. Not only can we influence our city, our neighborhoods, but we can also greatly encourage the believers around the world who are engaged in the work of Christ.

Today, we focus primarily on the Christians who suffer persecution for their faith, whether it is from their government, militant religious groups, employers or neighbors. Over 200 million Christians live in areas where this is a daily reality. They make a sacrifice to proclaim Christ in their lives and to share the gospel in their communities.

How can we help Christians who are persecuted for their faith? Let’s look at the next part of Paul’s advice.

2. Judgment Day is Coming, But Our Day is Now! vs. 4-8

Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to “be alert and sober” (vs. 6). He reminded the believers that they were “sons and daughters of the day,” those who have experienced salvation as opposed to those still living under judgment, which is compared to night. This reminded the Thessalonian believers of the great change God had brought into their lives:

A. We’ve been rescued and forgiven

Col. 1:13 For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

B. We’ve been brought out of darkness into light

Eph. 5:8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light.

How did your life change when you became a Christian? We should all be able to give an account of how our lives are different because we live for the Lord. Our lives should not look the same as those without Christ. But if you ask that of a Muslim Background Believer (a Christian who converted from Islam), you may hear a very dramatic story of the radical change needed.

Testimony from Nigeria: From Persecutor to Praising Christ

I hated Christians. I was an imam in a mosque in northern Nigeria’s Kano state, a predominantly Muslim area. I was a very, very devout Muslim. I wanted to get rid of all Christians. I reasoned that if I killed a Christian, it helped the jihad. Once I burned a church. Another time, I tried to kill a man when I heard him listening to a Christian tape on the street. I used to hit Christian children with sticks.

Everything changed for me one night when I had decided to lead my cows to ruin a Christian’s farm. On that very night, Jesus came to me in a dream. I saw a white light. Jesus talked to me and said, “If you don’t stop, you’re going to die.” I was very afraid. The following morning, I still wanted to go to the Christian farm to spoil it. But when I got to that farm, my eyes started spinning. I fell down and my body started convulsing. My family found me and took me home.
After that night, God led me to a pastor’s house, the same pastor whose church I had burned down. They were afraid at first, thinking that I wanted to kill them, but the Holy Spirit spoke to the pastor’s wife. “Pray for him because he came for prayer,” she said. “Let him enter.” She allowed me into their house. The pastor started to pray for me.

God gave me a new heart and a new spirit that day. God replaced my heart of stone with a heart of flesh. Weeping, I told the pastor “I’m very sorry. God has showed me I’m a dirty person. The Lord has showed me the useless things I’ve done are no good, for many years past. I’m very sorry.” And I begged the pastor to forgive me. “God has showed me right things. Jesus said, ‘Come to me.’ He removed the bad heart. I used to do so many bad things. Now I understand what I used to do. I used to fight because I was so angry.”

The pastor told me, “Don’t worry. Today you are free. Accept Jesus as your savior.” So I accepted Jesus. That was 13 years ago.

Now, I’m 35 years old and I am a Fulani missionary. God wants me to preach in Fulani camps, to go to the bush and teach adults and children the word of God, to tell them how much Jesus loves them. I even share the gospel with imams who are like how I once was. Many are receptive. I tell them I was a Muslim like them. I explain that Jesus is savior. He is good. Without him, there is no life. So I want all those people to have Jesus. I pray God continues to give me materials for spreading the gospel.

C. We are God’s workmanship (= God’s samples, God’s showoff piece!)

Eph. 2:10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Example: If we love those who love us, God says “Big deal because even the world does that.” We become a powerful testimony when we show love to our enemies. For persecuted Christians, it would be easy for them to strike back at their persecutors in anger, but that is not what God wants. I want to share with you the powerful testimony of a Colombian Christian named Alex Puerta because his life models this.

Alex lives in the most dangerous country in the world. Abductions and violent crimes are common in Colombia. Alex, like every other Colombian, knew this, but that is just a reality he was forced to live with. Even though he had heard many stories of violence, he would never have anticipated how violence would personally affect him.

He was riding a bus with his evangelistic youth group when they were stopped by paramilitary soldiers. The youth complied with soldiers’ orders to exit the bus. Once they were forced to the ground with their hands and feet tied-up, the soldiers began shooting them. All appeared dead, but one voice rose from underneath the pile of bodies. Alex, severely wounded, was compelled by the Spirit of the Lord to tell the soldiers, “Jesus loves you.” Though he lay there bleeding from a gunshot wound to the head, he followed God’s leading.

The soldiers were enraged.

They ran over to Alex. Only his head was exposed. They tried to cut off his head with their machetes, but fled in fear when they could not.
Alex’s life was spared. He is now a living testimony to God’s love and forgiveness as he ministers amongst the same groups of people responsible for killing his friends and wounding him, causing loss of sight in one eye and legal blindness in the other. When asked why he isn’t afraid, Alex answered, “What else can they do to me?”

God has called Alex to do a special work that would not be possible without forgiveness. He exudes thankfulness for what he has received from God, and the incredible forgiveness demonstrates that deep appreciation. Alex has chosen to forgive just as the Lord has forgiven him: “There is no Christian life without forgiveness.”

**D. We have been blessed by God to be witnesses for God to the World**

**Psalm 67:**

1. God be gracious to us and bless us,  
   And cause His face to shine upon us— Selah.
2. That Your way may be known on the earth,  
   Your salvation among all nations.
3. Let the peoples praise You, O God;  
   Let all the peoples praise You.
4. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy;  
   For You will judge the peoples with uprightness  
   And guide the nations on the earth. Selah.
5. Let the peoples praise You, O God;  
   Let all the peoples praise You.
6. The earth has yielded its produce;  
   God, our God, blesses us.
7. God blesses us,  
   That all the ends of the earth may fear Him.

We have been entrusted with the gospel. We are privileged to know the truth and we are blessed to proclaim this truth among the unsaved. But, there is the sober reality of judgment that awaits those who reject God. It is the responsibility of the Church to warn those around us of the destruction that befalls the unrighteous. In many ways, we are free to share that message in this country, but there is an increasing hostility to the gospel throughout the world. Just as we should not allow fear to silence our faith, our persecuted brothers and sisters serve as a bold example to us when they stand strong in their faith despite the storm of opposition they face.

• In Sri Lanka, more than 160 churches have been attacked by angry Buddhists in the last 2 years; Yet, remarkably, as the church has ministered to those ravaged by the tsunami, the reality of Christ, and the integrity of His church is being dramatically displayed. In the past, persecution came in the form of verbal threats, arson, assault, and even murder. But now Buddhist villagers are asking the Christians to help them. Followers of Christ are now entering villages and earning the goodwill of the people through their humility and Christ-like love. Through acts of service and the extension of love, hearts are changing. In village after village the response of the people is the same: “If we chase the Christians out of the village, who will look after us?”

What a glorious report! Surely, it is the truth of Christ that is storming the strongholds that Satan has built!
Transition: With our knowledge of Christ and faith in His glorious resurrection, we possess the one and only true message of hope for the world! It is the message of Christ that can bring light into darkness; it is the message of Christ that God uses to storm the strongholds!

We must embrace our identity as messengers of hope to a fallen world and identify our role in storming the spiritual strongholds that oppose God’s truth.

3. Our Privilege is Great! vs. 8-11

A. We are Soldiers of Salvation:

Paul uses what is for him a well-known theme (see: Eph. 6:11ff). Yet, while we are called to be “soldiers” our battle is very different from the wars we see being fought today. Our mission is life! Our message is peace! This is seen in the armor we have been given: (vs. 8: faith, love, and salvation!)

B. We are Servants of Encouragement:

Paul called upon the believers in Thessalonica to both be encouraged and to be encouragers!

Four Ways to Encourage Persecuted Christians:

1. Recognize that we all share the same relationship with Christ.

It is all too easy to forget that believers in every culture, regardless of our racial and cultural differences, are ONE in Christ!

This means that when they suffer, we suffer; when they rejoice, we rejoice (I Corinthians 12:26). As citizens of heaven, and children of the Father, we have more in common with the believers around the world than we do with our unbelieving American neighbors. It is important that we keep this in mind, and not let the things of this world obscure our heavenly heritage.

2. Pray for the protection, encouragement and strengthening of our persecuted brethren.

This is the main point of our service today, in honor of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. (Refer the congregation to the bulletin insert provided as part of Open Doors’ IDOP Kit)

Open Doors provides many ways to stay informed about the needs and challenges facing the Persecuted Church. Our prayer must be on-going, informed, sincere, and strategic.

Spend time in prayer, everyone gathering in groups of three or four people to focus on the requests listed in the bulletin inserts.

3. Invest your time.

Open Doors has many opportunities ranging from participation in prayer groups to serving as an overseas courier for a week or two at a time.

4. Invest your resources.

Throughout the world, the need for Bibles and other Christian literature continues to grow. To keep up, Open Doors must constantly rely on the generosity of the people of God. Your support of Open Doors is really a decision to become a partner, a fellow-laborer with Christ to bring the light of God’s Word to those to whom the worship of God poses a daily risk of persecution and humiliation.
Today we pray for the Persecuted Church. And we pray that God would come in His power – like a mighty wave of the Spirit – and storm the strongholds that Satan is building, so that the world may see the love and grace of Christ, and come to have a hope that is eternal, anchored in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Conclusion:**

Take a special love offering for our faithful brothers and sisters in Christ as they continue to minister in their towns and villages that were devastated by the South Asia tsunami.