

# *Standing Strong*

by

Rocky Fleming

*"that they may be called oaks of righteousness," Isaiah 61:3 ESV*

In 1969 Hurricane Camille blew through the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We lived about seventy miles north of where the eye of the devastating hurricane made landfall, so we were hit hard as well. The aftermath of this deadly Category 5 tempest was overwhelming. Camille caused more than 200 deaths and billions of dollars in damage. The storm at the time was called the “*greatest catastrophe ever to strike the United States and perhaps the most significant economic weather event in the world's history.*” I took a visit shortly afterwards to see all that it had done. Houses, motels, restaurants, churches, and even small towns were blown away. But what was interesting was that the centuries old *Live Oaks* were still standing. The people rebuilt, which is part of the resilient nature of the people who live there. The coast was reclaimed, and houses, hotels and restaurants were rebuilt. But the purging also opened the door for the gambling casinos a few years later to get a foothold in a once sleepy gulf coast community, and this stigma became an engine for their economy. Evil came *a knocking*, and it found a place to live which often happens in the storms of life, and is why we need to know how to stand strong in our storms.

Several smaller hurricanes followed over the next few years. Even so, these smaller hurricanes purged the area, except for those old *Live Oak* trees that held their ground. Then the mother of them all landed in August of 2005. Hurricane Katrina claimed 1,836 lives. The strongest winds, which were Katrina’s front right quadrant slammed into Gulfport and Biloxi, Mississippi, which was the same area Camille had hit. An even greater purging of houses, restaurants, motels, churches and those “firmly rooted” casinos were destroyed. It looked like an atomic bomb had been detonated in the area. Nothing was untouched or without some kind of damage or demise, except those old *Live Oak* trees. They are still standing today.

What makes those coastal *Live Oaks* so strong and resilient that they can weather storms that other things are devastated by? Well I did a little research on the reason. The coastal *Live Oak* has a broader root system than it is tall, and this gives them a very low center of gravity. This also makes them harder to blow over. Next, the wood is very dense and strong because they have been subject to many countless hurricanes over the millennia, and have learned to adapt to them. Little wonder the government in the early 1800s designated naval oak reserves for shipbuilding purposes. The key thing we need to understand, for it does tie into the scripture above, is that it is the *Live Oak*’s root system and their internal strength that has been produced from the tests of numerous storms that causes them to be able to endure the worst of storms. So what can we learn spiritually from this class in the *Dendrology* of the *Live Oak* tree? Let’s consider:

The scripture above in Isaiah speaks of God's man becoming so strong in being able to endure and overcome the challenges being thrown at us that we are called *Oaks of Righteousness*. If we will dwell on this thought a little we can see God's plan for His men, in that He wants us to become strong in Him and His ways, for this is where the "*Righteousness*" identification becomes relevant. We need to make note of this, for we must rewrite our understanding of strength, and how it is secured. Most of us have heard the *phrases physical strength, and strength of character*. We have also heard *mental toughness and intestinal fortitude (or guts)*. We think we know how to become strong in those areas. But what do we think of when we hear the phrase *spiritually strong*? If we will be honest we think it comes across as being strong in an area that most people do not understand, and because of this it sounds rather mystical to most people. They just can't get their mind around it. Their understanding of *spiritual strength* then becomes detached or isolated from the other forms of strength. But it should not, and it does not when people see those *Oaks of Righteousness* standing strong in the most challenging of conditions. Those *Oaks of Righteousness* mentioned in the Bible defy the normal response by most people, for they operate under a different code. They laugh when others cry. They weep when others cannot see a problem. They pray when others complain. They have hope when others feel hopeless. They dispense hope when others will not look beyond their own needs. Their roots are deep and strong with godly relationships that support them. This is because their taproot is firmly planted in God's written word the Bible, and God's *Living Word*, Jesus. They abide in Jesus and the roots that spring from this essential relationship spread out and give them the foundation and stability they stand on. This taproot into Jesus opens their hearts and minds to a wisdom that comes only from Him, and this wisdom serves them when the storms of life come ... and they will come. The storms must come so that like the coastal *Live Oaks*, the internal fiber of our being will be challenged and made strong. Yes indeed. I think the description; "*Oaks of Righteousness*" is a good one, especially if we understand the real strength being described.

Where are you right now? Would you describe yourself as an *Oak of Righteousness*? Would you like to be? Are you willing to ask God to make you into this kind of man, even if it requires a storm or two? Maybe you are going through a storm right now? I have a dear friend who has had to weather a personal storm with the business that he owns for 6 months now. It has brought financial challenges, and realignments needed for standing strong. He is hurting deeply, for his storm includes a broken relationship, which is the most difficult challenge for him. But I also see a man whose foundation and internal fiber being strengthened. The way the Lord works is to prepare a man such as this for something greater than he is presently involved with, and that will come as well. In his present storm it would be easy to see it as wasteful, useless, unnecessary, for his desire is to genuinely serve the Lord and His work. But God is preparing this man for something greater, and it requires that He prepares the man by making him an *Oak of Righteousness* who can be hit by storms that will destroy everything around him, but not him.

Our landscape in life will be constantly changing. Fads come and go. Styles come and go. Forms come and go. Storms come and go. But a man of God who is firmly rooted in Christ will be like those coastal *Live Oaks*. He will stand firm under all tests, and in all conditions ... and he will not be moved. He will remain, and his legacy will follow him beyond the grave. That is an *Oak of Righteousness* God is creating in you, if you will let Him.

*"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." Colossians 2:6-7*

