

## “Surviving the Storm”

### *Under Pressure: Pt.1*

Anybody feeling the pressure? This morning we are beginning a new series that I think will be of great benefit to all of us in 2022 if we can apply it's simple to understand – tricky to *implement* – but simple to understand principle to our day-to-day lives. And it's a principle that really applies to *every* area of our lives. It's a principle that became very clear to me over the course of our family summer vacation probably 15 years ago and I've been thinking about it ever since. In fact, if you've been around a while you'll know we've covered this ground before. But it's worth revisiting.

But I remember we wanted an inexpensive beach vacation and gas was really high that summer so we just decided to drive on down to Galveston. Now, a beach vacation for me involves a lot of sitting around doing nothing. I just unwind. And when I unwind, I like to read. Nothing church related – no offense - just something to take my mind to another time and place.

So that year, since we were in Galveston, I thought it might be fun to read a book about the *destruction* of Galveston – that's just the kind of fun guy I am. So I picked up a copy of *Isaac's Storm* by Erik Larson, the story of the great hurricane of 1900 and just a really, really good book.

The Galveston hurricane of 1900 remains to this day the deadliest natural disaster in US history. Estimates place the number dead at between 6,000 and 12,000. Most list it at 8,000. To put that in some perspective, the horrors of Hurricane Katrina a few years ago claimed 1,800 lives. In fact, all the hurricanes in America since 1900 combined don't add up to as many deaths as The Great Storm of 1900.

So there I was, sitting on the beach in Galveston, reading a detailed account of the storm that hit this very beach and destroyed this very city a little over a hundred years before. And to add to the drama, while we were in Galveston, Hurricane Dolly was blowing in rough seas and would hit land just down the gulf at Padre Island. And then just a few months later, Hurricane Ike did strike Galveston directly and cost over 80 lives and about \$22 billion in damages.

In fact, Ike was a bigger storm than the one that hit Galveston in 1900, much bigger. But the reason that it wasn't as devastating a hundred years later is directly linked to a decision made by the residents of Galveston after the 1900 storm. And that decision illustrates the principle of our series perfectly.

You see, in 1900, the highest point on Galveston Island was 8.7 ft. above sea level. They used to say that when ships sailed into harbor it looked like they were floating down the main street. The city was basically level to the sea. When the Great Storm hit it brought in waves of water 15 ft. high. What did we say the highest point in the city was – 8.7ft.? So let's do the math - 15 minus 8.7 equals “*Uh-oh!*” It literally washed the city into the sea.

Now, fourteen years earlier in 1886, a big storm had wiped out a nearby coastal town called Indianola and some Galveston residents started calling for a sea wall to be built on the island. But the city fathers decided that such a wall would cost too much, ruin their nice view and besides, the leading meteorologists at the time assured them that a storm that big could never hit their island anyway. In 1902...they built the wall.

If you've ever walked along the Galveston shoreline, you know that there is now a 17 ft. wall that separates the water from the land. In fact, after the Great Storm, they jacked up buildings, brought in dirt and actually raised the city's elevation by several feet. It was considered the one of the greatest engineering feats of modern times. Nearly a dozen serious storms have hit Galveston since 1900, and yet the city has survived. Why? Because they have built some *margin* into their lives.

You see, you can't stop storms from coming, but you can put some margin between you and the storm. Margin is what keeps the storms of life from crushing us to death. And that's what we are going to talk about in the coming weeks – margin. It may be one of the most important words in our lives. You won't find the word “margin” in the Bible, but you will find the concept nearly everywhere you look.

Jesus told a parable one time and this is how it sounds in the *Message* translation. **Matthew 7:24-27(MSG)**, “*These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock. "But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards."* Jesus is talking about margin.

And just like we can't stop literal storms from crashing into our cities, we can't stop figurative storms from crashing into our lives. This pandemic has left no illusions about that. And if we live our lives with no margin then there's no room for error. And that means if we face one storm financially, one storm in our scheduling, one storm morally, one storm emotionally, we'll be wiped out. Our lives collapse like a house of cards.

But we see it all the time. You see it in the married couple who are both at the end of their rope **emotionally** and finally they have that one last big argument and somebody goes over the line and they walk away and say, “I can’t take this anymore. I can’t handle it.” You see it in the teenager who skates on the edge **morally**, so close to the line they know they should never cross, but then one night they cross it. And they have to live with those memories – potentially scars – that haunt them the rest of their lives.

You see it in families who are stretched to the limit **financially** and all the sudden there’s an unexpected bill and they go over the edge and have to declare bankruptcy. And I bet *all* of us can relate to having your **schedule** so full that you can’t enjoy anything you do because you’re so concerned about getting to the next thing on time. None of us are built to live at the edge for very long. Eventually, if you don’t have margin in your life, there will come a storm and you will have a problem – emotionally, morally, financially, with your health, or with your schedule.

And the truth is, we live in a culture that pushes us to our limits and so we think we have to live there. But as we are going to see for the next month, you don’t have to live there. In fact, God has a plan for your life and for my life where He invites us away from the edge to live a life of margin.

To get started this morning, I want to give you a couple of definitions because we’re going to talk about margin all throughout this series, so I want to just go ahead and define it right up front. So here’s the definition we’re going to use. **Margin is the amount available beyond what is actually needed.** It’s the extra or the reserve. When you open up a book, there’s a page with some text and what’s around the text? We call it the...margin. If you didn’t have margins in a book, it would be very difficult to read. The brain needs some white space to process the text.

We have margin on our roads. When you pull out on the highway, they don’t build the lanes as wide as our cars do they? I don’t want three inches on each side, I want *three* feet on each side. If you’re driving next to *me*, you might want six feet. We want margin on our highways. We want there to be more pavement than is actually needed.

It’s why we don’t want to stand too close or sit too close to someone. I don’t want you in my personal space, I want some margin. The pandemic has made this even more significant. Have you been to a movie recently? If someone even sits in your row, you’re like, “Nope, I’m moving!” No, you want some margin. Extra space. Extra room.

In the world of physical things that we can see, we strive for margin. We want there to be plenty of room, plenty of space. But for some reason, in our finances and in our schedules and in our morality and in our emotions, we live life with no margin. And then we wonder why we feel under pressure. It's because we've built a house of cards.

A second definition – and this takes us more to what we're going to talk about for a few weeks - **Personally margin is the space between our current performance and our limits.** Margin is when you run, but you don't run *as* fast as you could. There's some space between your current performance and your limits. Margin is showing up somewhere early and having ten or fifteen minutes before something begins – like church for instance!

Margin is getting to the end of the month and there being money left over because there was more than you needed. Margin is getting into an argument or having some sort of crises in your life and having the emotional ability to deal without losing your temper or losing your mind. That's what margin is.

And the truth is, just like you want it on a piece of paper, and just like you want it on the highway, there is something in us that needs it in the critical areas of our lives. And yet we live in a culture that pushes us to our limits and at our limits there's no margin.

Now, if you don't have margin in your life, there are several things that happen. Most of them are pretty predictable. **First thing is your stress levels go up.** As your margins decrease, your stress levels increase. Everyone of us knows this if we drive around this city. You're sitting in the car and you're supposed to be there when the big hand reaches the twelve and you're about twenty minutes away and you're in traffic. And then you have 19 minutes and then 18 minutes and as the big hand gets close to the twelve, what happens emotionally? You just get more stressful and more stressful, why? Because your margin is shrinking. And as the margin shrinks, your stress level goes up.

If you are here today and you're a pretty stressed out person – you feel under pressure - it's because you lack margin in your life somewhere. You don't have the space to function normally with out stress. If you are the person in your family that handles the finances and your spouse or one of your kids comes in and there's an unexpected expense and the margins are already a little tight, as soon as they start talking about the bill or they want to do a trip or a project, you see the margin decrease and all of the sudden you're emotional. And they say, "Every time we talk about money, you get all uptight." It's because you are watching the margins shrinking. And as the margins shrink, stress levels go up.

Second thing that happens – and this is related – is that **when our margins decrease and stress goes up, our relationships suffer**. You see, relationships happen in the margin. Relationships happen when there's *extra* time. When there's not financial pressure. When everybody has the emotional headroom to be able to deal with the stuff that happens in relationships.

But as margins decrease, so does the health of the relationships around us. Because we're more stressed out, so we're more focused on our own situation, which means that we have less to give to the people around us in terms of time and financial support and emotional support. And it's relationships that get squeezed out. Relationships always suffer as the margins decrease. This is why the number one cause of divorce is money problems.

But it's true in all kinds of areas. If you're married to someone who doesn't have a lot of margin, you feel like you never get their undivided attention. If you're a person who doesn't have a lot of margin in your life, the people around you don't feel like you ever really engage. You show up for dinner, you actually went on vacation, you showed up for the date. But even though words are coming out of your mouth and your head is nodding, the people around you feel like "He's not engaged. She's not engaged. Hey dad, you're here but you're not here. Honey even when you're home, you're not home."

That's just what happens to people who live without margin. You can't really fully engage relationally, because your mind is always engaged – and you may not even realize it - with how close am I to the edge and what can I do about the stress in my life.

If you're married, lack of margin will destroy intimacy in a marriage. Busyness is the enemy of intimacy. You can't have intimacy and be very, very busy at the same time, they just don't go together. So, often times, our lifestyles and our financial decisions and our emotional decisions create pressure that crushes intimacy. You can't nurture as a parent if you don't have margin. You can't listen if you don't have margin. You can't be sensitive. You can't be generous. Lack of margin squeezes everything relational out of our lives.

That's why we're going to do this series. Because your relationships – with each other, with family, even with God – they depend on our ability to create a life of margin in our schedules, in our money, in our morality and emotionally. So that's what we're going to talk about for the next six weeks to start this New Year. Because relationship happens right inside the margin of our lives.

Now, here's the interesting thing; this isn't new information, is it? This isn't "I never thought of that before!" This is, "I know Anthony, this is where I live. How to I *fix* it? I know I'm doing too much. I know I don't have enough money left over. I know I'm at the edge emotionally. I find myself saying 'I just can't deal with it.'" See, "I just can't deal with it" means that you are asking me to give emotionally and I don't have anything in reserve left to give. I've exhausted my margin. I'm spent emotionally so I just can't go there.

The question is, "Why do we allow ourselves to get there?" I mean, why don't we just do less? Why don't we all sell our homes and buy one that costs 2/3 less and have money in the bank – well, because we want to stay in Austin! But why don't we do that? Why don't we get out of relationships that just stress us out emotionally? If you're in a relationship where the moral margin is just getting tighter and tighter, why don't you just get out of it? Why don't you break up with that girl? Why don't you quit hanging around him? Why don't we just fix this?

And there's probably lots of answers to that question, but I think there's one we can all admit to if we're honest. I think we're scared. I think it's fear. I think for some of us, we're afraid of falling behind. "Because you know, my friends have their kids in

gymnastics and soccer and baseball and space camp and on and on and on. And I don't want my kids to fall behind so now my *children* don't have any margin either." Our children need their own iPhones to keep up with their schedules at 8 and 9 and 10 years old. And then the schedule that we've imposed on them imposes pressure on us and we don't enjoy any of it.

And our calendars are full of all this stuff and we're so busy and when we get together we talk about all the things our kids are doing, but nobody ever stops to say, "Are you enjoying life?" "No! And I don't really have the time or the emotional capacity to talk about it either!" Isn't it true?

We're afraid of falling behind. We're afraid of falling behind professionally. We're afraid of falling behind in terms of what we own. We're afraid of falling behind in terms of our experiences. We're afraid. And so again, in an attempt to have more and do more, we end up with less of a life – we're squeezed. There are some of you who have more money than you've ever had before and you're more worried about money than you've ever been before. You have more opportunities to do more incredible things than you've ever had before. And your schedule stresses...you...out. Isn't that amazing?

And the crazy thing is, we're afraid we're going to fall behind other people who don't have margin in *their* lives either. They're under as much pressure as we are! It's just ridiculous. So why don't you sell your house? Why don't you spend less? Why don't you trim your schedule? Why don't you get out of that relationship? Why don't you just say "no" to some stuff? Is it because you're afraid? We're going to talk about that.

Now, the other interesting thing about all this discussion is, when you open the Bible, and when you look around at all we know about God here's what we find...that your Heavenly Father and my Heavenly Father is standing before us saying, "Come on back. Step away from the edge. That's unsustainable. It's maybe sustainable for you but not your wife, for your wife but not your kids, maybe not for the people in your business. But you need to come on back from the edge. You've allowed culture to push you past the margins and you can't stay there for long without there being consequences. That's not going to make you successful. It's certainly not making you happier."

And what we find in scripture again and again, there's a constant invitation to come back from the edge. For instance when God first chose a nation to represent Him – which is an amazing thing in itself – but way back, God chose the nation of Israel and said "you are going to be My people, My representatives to the world."

And so that they would know what that entailed and who He was, God gave them "the Law." The first five books of the Bible are called "the Law." And when God laid out "the Law" for the nation of Israel, He *mandated* margin. "Thou shalt have margin." He didn't wait for them to figure it out or burn themselves out, He just mandated margin up front. You find this in all kinds of areas.

For example, He said, "Friday night, if you are not done with your to-do list, you just hang it up until Sunday morning, but on Saturday – on *Sabbath Day* – you don't work." But God, there's so much to do! "Don't care, just go home. You have 24 hours that you can't work. I'm going to build margin into your schedule, so one day out of seven you just hang out. Spend time with your family. Spend time with Me, your God. But for 24 hours every week, Thou shalt not fill up thy schedule and go, go, go."

It went further, He said they needed to bring margin into the environment, so one year out of seven, they couldn't plant crops on their land. "But God, we'll starve!" No, you need margin. I've created things this way. You have to trust me or you'll wear the land out just like you'd wear yourselves out. So one year out of seven, no planting, no harvesting. Let the land rest. Let it have some margin.

Then He really got personal. He said, “Thou shalt have margin financially. You’re going to live on 80% of your income. Because I want you to take 10% and invest it in the Temple and I want you to take another 10% and give it away to poor people.” Jewish people under the Law were not allowed to live at 100% of their income. You were going to have a 20% margin for God. That was the Law.

You read the rest of the Law and you see this concept weaving all the way through it. God was saying to His people, “I know what you’re *capable* of...I don’t want you to live there. I know what you *could* accomplish...I don’t want you to live there. I know what you *could* pack in your schedule...I don’t want you to do that. I know what you *could* do with your money...I’m calling you back from the edge. I’m calling you to margin.”

And then the nation of Israel forgot God. They said, “Aw, who needs your moral limits. Forget your financial limits. Forget your time limits. We’re going to live to the max.” And God said, “Ok”, called in the Babylonians and shipped them off into slavery for 70 years before they learned their lesson. And in slavery, they learned all about different kinds of limits. And they learned their lesson and He brought them back to their own land. And they reestablished Temple worship and they reestablished the Sabbath and the tithe and on they went.

Here’s the point, in the Old Testament; God called His people to a life of margin and here’s the promise – and we’ll see this later on in the series – God says, “You’re *so* worried that you won’t produce. You’re *so* worried that you’re going to fall behind. You’re *so* worried of what’s going to happen. Hey, trust Me. I created economy. I created time. I created morality. And I created you as a relational and emotional being. Now step back from the edge and trust Me.”

And then Jesus showed up. And one day some guys walked up and said, “Hey Jesus, you know all the Law, what’s the most important commandment in the Law?” And Jesus said, “Here’s how God would like you to prioritize your life. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. And, on par with that, love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Well, that’s going to take time. I’m going to have to say “no” to some stuff to do that. What’s that have to do with getting stuff done and changing the world and getting to gymnastics on time?” And God says, “Well whatever, but just make sure there’s time to love me with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself and then you do whatever you want to with the rest of your time.” But you see, that requires margin. Because, again, relationships happen in the margins of life.

And what we're going to see in this series is this; the Bible teaches that as you squeeze margin out, you squeeze God out of your life. As the margins get thinner, so does your relationship with our Heavenly Father because relationship happens in the margin. You see, doing what I do, I meet a lot of people who say, "I used to be a Christian or I used to go to church." And very rarely do I meet anyone who dropped out because they did a big investigation and discovered that the whole God/Jesus thing wasn't real. Here's what I hear, "I just got...busy." Their margin shrank and what their actions are saying that their words would never say is, "I don't really have time for God."

Do you know why we drift? It's because our time and our money and our affection and our morality margins get *squeezed*. And you squeeze all that out and you will squeeze out relationship with your Heavenly Father as well. You don't have to believe me now. But try it and you'll believe me later. That's why God's invitation is always, "Come back to me. Come back from the edge. Let me help you create margin. And within the margin you will thrive and you will grow and you will prosper. Because all that stuff you're worried about, I can handle that. But I want you to step back from the edge and just trust me."

I want you to just think about this for a minute. It's amazing how fast a man who's had a heart attack can find margin. I mean the schedule changes, his diet changes; suddenly he has time to exercise and for all this stuff that he never had time for before. It's amazing how a woman whose marriage is falling apart can find time for important things. All the sudden all the other things on the calendar don't seem so important and she can find the time and find the finances and find the emotional energy to invest in the relationship to save her marriage.

Here's my point, you are *going* to live within limits. Limits you chose, limits the culture pushes on you or the limits that your Heavenly Father invites you to. There's an interesting verse in *Revelation*, I'll close with this. It's very familiar; in fact, when I was a kid growing up there was a picture that illustrated this verse on the Sunday School wall. Anybody remember this?

This is the NIV version. The one I learned started with "Behold" but this is the modern version, **Revelation 3:20**, "*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears...*" - in other words if you'll turn down the music long enough, if you'll pause long enough, if you can just find time to listen - "*...my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*"

Here's the point as we close, your savior at the bidding of your Heavenly Father, is more than willing to come into your life and lead you to margin. But He's not going to force the issue. He's going to wait until you open the door. And if you wait and open the door on a hospital bed, he'll come in then and help you pick up the pieces and we'll find margin. If you wait and open the door after a divorce, then your savior is patient and he'll wait and come in after the divorce and help you pick up the pieces and lead you to a life of margin. If you wait until bankruptcy, he'll wait. If you wait until you're pregnant, he'll wait.

My point is you *will* live within limits – yours, cultures or God's. So the question is this – and again it goes back to this fear thing - why don't we *choose* - instead of being *forced* - to step away from the extremes and say to our Heavenly Father who created us and knows us inside and out, "Ok, here's my time, here's my money, here are my emotions and the relationships that affect my emotions, here's my morality. And I'm no longer going to squeeze everything I can out of life until my life is out of control. I'm going to surrender that to you. I'm going to open the door and let you into those under pressure areas of my life."

And when you do, He will lead you to a life of margin. It's really the only life that's worth living. And in the margin, you'll discover what it means to have relationship with a God who says "call me Father" and with His son, Jesus Christ.

Over the next several weeks, we are going to get really, really practical and talk about each of these key areas in our lives when it comes to margin – to the places where we are most under pressure. We're going to see what the Bible says about our money and our calendar and our morality. It's going to set some of you free. It's going to bring some of you peace. It's one of the most important principles you can implement in life.

And our goal is simply this; that we'd have the courage – and it takes courage because there's a lot of fear in this subject – we'd have the courage to open the door and invite our savior into those areas of our life.

Let's pray...