

Maui Wildfire Victims Finding Solace in Prophetic Word of Restoration

A couple of weeks before the wildfires began in Lahaina, Maui, Hawaii, in early August, Pastor Steven Santos wrote a sermon titled "My Stronghold in Times of Trouble." Little did Pastor Santos know just how prophetic that sermon would be.

On August 18—10 days after the fires began and with Calvary Chapel Westside Maui still intact—Santos stood at the Pastors and Leaders Conference in Honolulu and delivered the story he was to tell his congregation.

"When I was writing this sermon, I honestly didn't think it was going to be prophetic," Santos told Charisma News in an exclusive interview this week.

Santos' sermon was to tell the biblical story of Elijah on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 19, after Elijah had defeated the prophets of Baal and had them arrested and executed. Elijah was then hunted by Ahab and Jezebel for his deeds, and fled into the wilderness. Elijah, in his misery, asked God to simply let him die.

But it was God who was Elijah's stronghold during his times of trouble. It was a story of which God clearly reminded Santos after waking him from his sleep on his own living room floor at 4 a.m. one night as the fires raged. His house was full of friends and relatives who had fled to safety.

"God woke me up and I asked Him, 'What do I tell these people who have lost everything?' asked Santos, who has pastored at Calvary Chapel Westside Maui since 1993. "Do I tell them that God loves them and He has a beautiful plan for their lives? I told him, 'I need Your Word; I need to know what to say to

these people so they can grab hold of you. It's got to come from the Bible because Your Word is eternal.'

✖ "I told God, you called me to be a pastor. I know people are going to be like, OK Pastor Steve, tell us what to do now. Everybody's going to want answers. Some people tell me now 'I don't want your God.' Even my granddaughter asked me, 'Why would God do this?'"

First Kings 19:11-12 reads, "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."

Santos said God spoke to him almost immediately and relayed the same message.

"God said to me, 'I was not in the fire, but I am going to speak.' So, the Lord was not in these fires, and I praise God that He does speak to us."

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NPR reported recently that 97 people had lost their lives in the wildfires, a number lowered from a previous reported total of 115. Sadly, however, Santos said that, as of last Friday, 11 additional local people had taken their own lives, which could have resulted from the hopelessness and losses they encountered from the tragedy.

No one in Santos' congregation was killed in the fires, although Santos said one woman from his church was burned on over 70% of her body—and she survived.

“Frankly, no one survives that, but this woman is a survivor,” Santos says. “We went to the hospital and her husband was just broken, but we got to see her. It’s a miracle she’s still living, praise God.”

Most of the entire town of Lahaina now lays in ruins, but miraculously, Calvary Chapel Westside Maui still stands. Local officials decreed that no one is allowed to return to that area of Lahaina yet.

Many people from Calvary Chapel lost their homes, and many have been displaced and are now living on the other side of the island where Santos says churches are growing. Once they are allowed back in the burn zone, Santos says, Calvary Chapel will almost be like a church plant because so many people are either leaving the area or they are migrating to the mainland U.S.

Many are living in hotels in Maui, but soon will be displaced again when the hotels open for the winter season.

“The town is almost completely gone,” Santos says. “There’s about 1,000 homes upon the hill maybe still above where the fire was. There are three schools—a grade school, a middle school and Lahaina High School, the oldest high school in the Pacific—and those are still there. But everything below that, all the way to the ocean, for the greater part is completely burned.

“When you see that, people are just kind of dumbstruck. You are just kind of numb. People are still trying to find out who is alive and who we’ve lost.”

Santos says he and his family intend to stay in the area. “I know this is what God has called me to do,” he says. “I’ve been doing it for 30 years.”

Since the fires, God imparted a message to Santos about the needs of the survivors and what he and his congregation must

do not only as Christians but as humanitarians to help.

“God spoke clearly to my heart that the people need food, they need water and they need rest,” Santos says. “They also need to see that God did not do this. But God is here now and He wants to speak. As time goes on, mental hurt, pain and anguish will increase. People aren’t going to get over this quickly.

“But there is a lot of opportunity here to show that God indeed is good. He will help us make the most of it.”

Like any natural disaster, the wildfires have certainly been devastating for most everyone in Maui. But like God told Elijah in 1 Kings, Santos and his family will go back the way they came—in victory. {eoa}

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