

# The Johnstown Flood



In 1889, the railroad city of Johnstown, nestled in the mountains of central Pennsylvania, was a bustling steel city. The population was approx. 28,000. There were many immigrants, including Jews, from all over Europe who worked as coal miners and steel workers.

Fourteen miles up the valley from Johnstown was a prestigious hunting and fishing club. This was where the elite from Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and the surrounding area spent their weekends and holidays. Included in the membership of the club was Dale Carnegie, among other famous people. There was a two-mile long lake there created by a dam where numerous days were spent in leisure, boating, fishing and hunting.

This dam had been built by the state of Pennsylvania from the 1830's to 1853 for the state canal system. However, the state no longer had need of it and it was eventually sold to the hunting and fishing club in 1879.

Over the years of use, the dam had fallen into disrepair. It was in need of reconstruction. The release valves and pipes which controlled the water level in the lake were no longer functioning. Several contractors tried warning the owner of the club, and tried to give him advice as to the best way to repair the dam. The owner wanted to save some money. He did not heed their counsel and acted on his own to fix the dam as cheap as possible. Occasional leaks in the dam were stopped with rocks, dirt, and even manure. The club also lowered the breast of the dam, widening it for a two-lane road for easier access to the club. Even the dam's spillway had been lined with a fishing net to keep

the fish from escaping. This turned out to be a big mistake.

During the rainy season in late May, the Johnstown area had received several storms. The creeks and rivers were full and the ground was saturated. All night and throughout that afternoon on the 31st of May, the severe storm dropped 11 inches of rain onto the already saturated area.

That dark day, three warning messages were sent by telegraph of the danger of the dam breaking. Some messages had to be hand-carried where telegraph wires were broken due to the storms. These messages were sent down the valley to tell of the rising water, the leaking dam, and the imminent possibility of it bursting at any moment. Yet, many did not heed the warnings sent.

There was no way to release the pressure of the rising waters. The spillway was not effective due to the netting blocking debris. In vain, the club members tried to fill the leaks and holes in the dam which were becoming more frequent by the moment. They realized it was useless. The waters were rising too fast and beginning to crest the dam.

One Presbyterian minister had heard the telegraph warnings and went up to see the dam for himself. While observing the rising waters, the great dam gave way. All he could do for the towns below was to cry out to God for mercy on the people. See the book [Through the Johnstown Flood by a Survivor](#)

A train conductor was heading toward the dam when he realized the dam burst. He put his train in reverse, and gave the warning by sounding his whistle as he sped back down the valley trying to warn the people to get out of harm's way. He escaped into the hills after warning several towns of the coming waters, though he couldn't make it to Johnstown before his train was overtaken.

The gigantic 40' foot wave swept down the valley, swallowing homes, train cars, trees, and debris which piled up at two bridges which both gave way. The wall of water continued 14 miles down to Johnstown below. All the debris stopped at a large

bridge in Johnstown which held under the tremendous pressure. But, the nightmare had only begun. The stoves, kerosene and oil from the many homes and train cars piled up at the bridge caught fire. The fire, which lasted three days, destroyed many lives which may have been saved if they would have heeded the warnings. As a result, 2,209 people perished. One out of three bodies they found were unrecognizable due to the flood and fire.

*In this true account, we can learn the following...*

**How sad it is to know that this tragedy could have been avoided, yet the warnings went unheeded.**



1. The warning of the need to repair the dam properly.
2. Three warnings by telegraph and hand-carrier down the valley.
3. The train engineer who whistled the final warning.

Though warned, the town was devastated!

Wives lost husbands and children.  
Husbands lost wives and children.  
Children lost parents, brothers and sisters.  
Many thousands of homes were devastated.  
One man lost his wife and all seven children.

This disaster was one of the worst of our national tragedies. All because one man refused to pay for the cost to repair a dam; and many refused to hear and heed the warnings of its danger.

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**May I with ink and pen, as the train conductor, sound you this warning!**

America today can be compared to Johnstown. The Bible teaches judgment is coming. Christians need to sound the warning! Jesus is coming and God's hate for sin is looming.

## I. We need to sound the warning.

Tell the lost of salvation in Christ. Go warn them of a literal, eternal hell where people go who are lost in sin without God.

Ps.9:17 The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.

We must warn them of the danger of their sin

Ezekiel 3:19 Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.

Ezekiel 33:3-5  
3 If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people;  
4 Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.  
5 He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him. But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul.

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## II. We must warn Christians~ strong dams to be building.

A. Christian homes and churches are God's dams helping to hold back judgment on sin.

"Ye are the salt of the earth..."Matt.5:13

B. Sometimes the old dam is in need of repair and restoration. "ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein..." Jer. 6:16

Eze 13:10 Because, even because they have seduced my people, saying, Peace; and there was no peace; and one built up a wall, and, lo, others daubed it with untempered mortar:

11 Say unto them which daub it with untempered mortar, that it shall fall: there shall be an overflowing shower; and ye, O great hailstones, shall fall; and a stormy wind shall rend it.

12 Lo, when the wall is fallen, shall it not be said unto you, Where is the daubing wherewith ye have daubed it?

13 Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; I will even rend it with a stormy wind in my fury; and there shall be an overflowing shower in mine anger, and great hailstones in my fury to consume it.

14 So will I break down the wall that ye have daubed with untempered mortar, and bring it down to the ground, so that the foundation thereof shall be discovered, and it shall fall, and ye shall be consumed in the midst thereof: and ye shall know that I am the LORD.

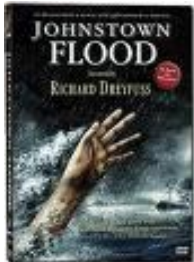
15 Thus will I accomplish my wrath upon the wall, and upon them that have daubed it with untempered mortar, and will say unto you, The wall is no more, neither they that daubed it;

### III. Those broken dams we need to be restoring by reaching out to broken people restoring them to faithful service.

Gal. 6:1 Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

James 5:16 Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

### IV. We need to be busy rescuing the perishing.



~ One 16-year-old boy in Johnstown was in the yard of his home and saw the wall of water coming. His father yelled to him to get up to the attic where the rest of his family had gone. He didn't have time, so he climbed onto the roof instead. When the gigantic

wall of water hit the house, it tumbled over. He scrambled to the upturned side and managed to hang on as his home was taken with the raging current, The house slammed into another house, piling up at the bridge. His family perished, trapped inside. He escaped with his life.

This same boy and his friend saw a woman trapped by her legs in debris at the bridge, crying out for help. The fire was drawing closer to her and she couldn't free herself. They pulled and tried in vain to free her legs. The flames came nearer and they could not free her. They watched in horror as she perished in the fire before they were able to free her.

As this young man's family and this woman, people without Christ are being swept into eternity with out hope and we must try to save them.



John 3:15-16 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,

that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

~ A passenger train was traveling through Johnstown at the time of the flood. The flood waters caught up and swirled away many of its cars. One of the passengers was a missionary lady who managed to climb on top of the train car which was swirling in the waters. No one was able to reach her. As she realized her fate, she began to sing "Nearer, my God to thee". She was heard singing that song till the swirling of the waters had carried her to her home above.

This young missionary witnessed to others by song even knowing she was going to die.

Do we really care?

### The question for all of us, if we are saved is... Are we sounding the warning?

The judgment of God is pending.

The lost into a Christless eternity are sinking.

>The dams are we properly building?

>Broken dams are we restoring?

>Those that are being swept away are we rescuing?

>Do we care for the dying?

Or are we like the owner of the lake? Are we more concerned for our own selfish interests, not willing to seek the safety and security of others.

*It is amazing to me how on the flood's anniversary on May 31, 2003 in Corbin, KY, exactly 114 years after this tragedy, that I woke up thinking about the Johnstown Flood. When I heard that train whistle, I thought about that train engineer sounding his last warning before that flood came. As God got my attention through this, I believe, that God wants to get the attention of many others. There is a judgment coming and we must give an account. I pray you will hear this warning.*

### The question today for you if you are lost is~ Are you heeding the warnings?

The flood is coming and the telegraph has been sent, the train whistle is now blowing. You need to flee from the wrath to come while you still can. Come to Jesus. He is your only refuge.

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## The Story of the Johnstown Flood 1889



### When I woke up on the morning of...

May 31, 2003, I heard a train whistle. It reminded me of the railroad town of Johnstown, PA, which I recently had the opportunity to visit. I then asked my wife if we still had a brochure on the Johnstown flood. After finding the brochure, I asked her to read it. Upon further enquiry, we saw the date of the flood was May 31, 1889. It made me wonder if there was a message God was trying to tell me having thought about this great tragedy on the very day of its 114th anniversary. God then gave me the following message which I preached that evening in a revival meeting in Corbin, Kentucky.

Now, each time I hear a train whistle blow, I think about the warning which you will read about in this brochure.

Please read it for yourself and see what I believe is a warning to our nation concerning the need to repent and turn back to God before the judgment of God is experienced just as sure as the flood this tract documents here.

***A catastrophe that can't be forgotten!***