

Responding to a devastating act of God

Like many people I am amazed at the video footage of the destruction and misery caused by Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. My heart goes out to those who have and will suffer because of the devastation. When catastrophic acts of God like that happen, I am driven to the Bible for words of encouragement and direction. Here are some of my thoughts, in no particular order.

First, I am in awe at the awesomeness of God's power and the frailty of humanity. People will ascribe the storm to Mother Nature. But the Bible says that God is the only real weather man:

“Whatever the Lord pleases He does, In Heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places. He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain; He brings wind out of His treasuries.” -Psalm 135:6-7

In contrast to the power of God demonstrated in extreme weather, we are aware of our own frailties and how fragile life in general is. We are at a loss to understand and in grief and shock and anger and fear we look up and ask “Why?” and “What purpose can there be in this?”

Second, I am in intense prayer for those affected. Too often we selfishly focus our prayers on what we want. Events like this bring us back to praying not for our wants but for what others need; the basic needs like food and water and shelter and clothing and preservation of human dignity. I also am in prayer for the authorities as they face a task larger than any of their regular duties, and hear frazzled and hurting people lash out at them during this awful time. Prayer must be one of the priorities for the people of God:

“Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and for all who are in authority.”
-I Timothy 2:1-2

Third, I respond through disaster relief ministry in Jesus' name. Our church, like many churches in many denominations, has a trained disaster relief team ready to go when called up by the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board. Like the minutemen of old, we are on standby to go and be a part of providing thousands of meals, showers, and clean up. What a great privilege to give financially and serve in a time of great need:

“And let our people also learn to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful.” -Titus 3:14

Fourth, I trust that God has providential reasons for bringing this calamity, but it would be foolish and hurtful for any human to ignorantly assign blame. Did God ever use catastrophic events in the Bible as a means of judgment? Absolutely! Remember when fire rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah? But the same Bible

rebukes Job's friends for insisting to Job that he was experiencing judgment for his sins. We know from the first chapter of Job that he experienced tragedy not because he was a sinner but because he was one of God's favorites! It is just plain stupid to assert we know what God is doing when we don't:

"He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." -Matthew 5:45

This same storm that has knocked over riverboat casinos also has flooded New Orleans Baptist Seminary! Being judges during a time like this is the last thing that is needed, whether it's Robert Kennedy Jr. blaming Governor Barbour of Mississippi in an article dated August 29th or Jerry Falwell blaming the ACLU after September 11th, 2001. Sometimes we just need to shut up and pray and volunteer to help!

Finally, I respond by making sure I am right with God. The uncertainties of life and weather push us to look beyond ourselves for ultimate meaning. In Luke chapter 13 Jesus reflected on a tragedy by pointing people to their need of God:

"Those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." -Luke 13:4-5

One of the neatest men in our church came to know Christ after September 11th! With it's anniversary coming up this month, and with a fresh tragedy now upon us, let's humble ourselves afresh before God. As Jesus said:

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."
-Matthew 11:28

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