

Hope In The Midst Of Katrina

Very early on Saturday, February 4 fourteen Alaskans departed for a much warmer climate. Our destination was Pass Christian, Mississippi approximately one hour east of New Orleans. Our mission was to help rebuild lives both physically and spiritually.

The devastation of New Orleans five months after Hurricane Katrina is still overwhelming. Block after block of ruined businesses greeted us. Huge apartment complexes sit empty. Once busy intersections with streetlights are now simple four way stops. Much of the city sits empty except for the ever present trucks hauling debris and rubble.

The fourteen people included a painter, a builder, a businessman, construction workers, a taxidermist, a sheet rocker, an educator, a pastor and even a seventy-five year old woman! The trip impacted all of us in four ways....

Emotionally, the impact was devastating. We met a man named Jimmy. Jimmy is eighty plus years old. He flew bombers in World War II. He witnessed the Nuremberg trials and the devastation of Hiroshima after the atomic bomb. He said, "The nuclear blast in Hiroshima destroyed about ten square miles. Hurricane Katrina wiped out hundreds even thousands of square miles."

In 1969 Hurricane Camille destroyed sixty-two pine trees in the yard of Wayne Favre yet his property never flooded. In August of 2005 things were different. Wayne Favre (a distant relative of the famous quarterback) lost everything and almost his life. When the hurricane hit his wife was suffering from cancer. The water flooded quickly. He quickly inflated an air mattress. He placed his wife upon it. He floated her to the roof of their home. They waited several hours on the roof for the water to subside. His house flooded to the ceiling. Our task was to tear out the sheetrock and insulation, spray the mold and then rebuild it.

Socially, the impact was exhilarating. A small army of Christians are working on the Gulf Coast and New Orleans to rebuild. Some call it the greatest humanitarian mission of the church in the history of America. We stayed in a small church. Seventy plus people sharing four bathrooms was an interesting experience. Nineteen men sleeping in a small room with limited ventilation reminded me why I got married! We joined teams from Ohio, Maine, California and Washington. In two weeks we formed lifetime friendships.

One such individual was TC. TC served in Vietnam as an 11 Bravo. He earned his combat infantryman's patch. After the war he was in and out of veterans administration hospitals. A life of drugs and violence didn't satisfy. Several years ago he discovered that Jesus died for him. The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus transformed his life. TC was scheduled to stay one week. The needs were so overwhelming and the people so grateful he stayed three weeks. I miss him already!

Physically, the impact was dynamite. We rose every morning at 6 AM. Breakfast was 6:30 AM. After our team meeting and devotions we started working. From 7:30 AM to 5:30 PM and sometimes later we worked hard. The physical labor, the warm sun, the sound of the ocean and the Cajun food were an unbeatable combination. The occasional frost in the morning quickly gave way to temperatures in the sixties and the seventies. The people were so grateful they brought us gumbo, crayfish, shrimp, red beans on rice and crab cakes. Who says that working for the Lord doesn't pay?!

Spiritually, the impact deepened our Christian faith. Romans 8:28 says, "All things work together for good to those who love God..." Lena and her family planned to evacuate to Memphis as the hurricane approached. Unfortunately, many of her friends and neighbors had nowhere to go. They showed up in her living room as the wind rose. The hurricane hit. Their vehicles floated away. Their careful preparations (extra food, chain saws, gas and oil) simply vanished in the surge. After the hurricane the heat was horrendous. No food, little water and no ice were followed by widespread looting. Lena's home was completely destroyed. Yet from the bad has come much good. Volunteers built a new home for she and her family. Lifelong friendships grew. Some meant it for evil but God meant it for good.

In Matthew 6:19 Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven..." Underneath the overpasses in New Orleans are hundreds of abandoned vehicles. Ruined by seawater they await the junkyard. Henderson Point in Pass Christian, Mississippi was the playground of the rich. The water is turquoise. The breeze is cool. The sun is warm. The homes were beautiful but today they are gone.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:34, "Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow..." We saw God meet our needs. When we needed sheet rock someone "happened" to order too much. We gladly took it off his hands! When we needed food an unexpected truck simply arrived.

Our two week experience on the Gulf Coast was a glimpse of heaven. It included a noble cause, deep friendships, working together toward a common goal and group harmony all mixed with beautiful weather. If you are searching for a chance to recharge your batteries and renew your perspective on life, don't try Hawaii- go to New Orleans.

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