

Katrina's Silver Lining

God can use even the darkest tragedy as a backdrop to showcase His mercy.

We've all heard about the dead bodies in the hospitals, the cars stuck in trees, the looting in the French Quarter and the federal government's slow-as-Mississippi-mud response to Hurricane Katrina. But did you hear about the man who was healed of deafness when a volunteer counselor prayed for him at a Dallas refugee shelter a few days after the storm? Probably not.

Most news broadcasts during the first week of the tragedy were depressing—

except when Fox News gave air time to Franklin Graham, whose Samaritan's Purse organization rushed food to evacuees before the federal government even realized that New Orleans was flooding. (Can we make Graham the director of FEMA?)

Samaritan's Purse was just one of many Christian charities that became the true heroes in this awful disaster. Their compassion unleashed a thousand miracles that were never reported.

It may sound trite to suggest there is a bright side to this tragedy. I certainly don't want to trivialize the pain felt by Gulf Coast residents, especially those who lost everything when nature's fury displaced 1 million people. But on the flip side, we can thank God that this disaster had a happy ending.

The stories of Christian generosity are everywhere. A 100-member congregation in Pascagoula, Mississippi, cooked hot

meals for 3,000 people a day from their parking lot—even though their sanctuary was destroyed. Churches all over the country welcomed evacuees, offered free apartments and even chartered planes to bring homeless families to a safe shelter.

A Missouri church covered the monthly payroll of a church in Slidell, Louisiana, that was flooded. Small ministries delivered tractor-trailer loads of baby food, Powerade and even underwear. And a church in Sri Lanka that funneled American aid to tsunami victims recently sent \$10,000 to help Katrina's survivors.

The storm opened unusual doors for ministry. In Biloxi, Mississippi, a Vietnamese community that has been closed to outsiders for years allowed a group of Christians from Mobile, Alabama, to operate a feeding center for the mostly Buddhist residents of their area—where Katrina's 9-foot storm surge reportedly swept 80 people out to sea. In nearby Pascagoula, Christian teenagers repaired houses for the elderly, and one old man wept when he was told he wouldn't be charged a dime for the work.

Hundreds of evacuees have prayed to receive Christ. In Mississippi, a man who was helping a group of Christian guys serve food to storm survivors stopped in the middle of cooking hot dogs and said, "I can't take it any more. I've got to get saved."

God has an uncanny way of turning bad things to good and using even the darkest tragedy as a backdrop to showcase His mercy. And that's why it really irked me when Christians began sending e-mails about God's judgment on New Orleans as soon as Katrina's eyewall had passed over southern Mississippi.

These armchair prophets were quick to claim that New Orleans was under water because God had smitten it. My question: If Hurricane Katrina was a judgment from God, why was the most notorious sector of the city left high and dry? Does God have bad aim? Shame on anybody who was hurling stones in the direction of Louisiana when frantic people (including many Christians) were stranded on the tops of their houses.

I asked several godly Christian leaders how they viewed this tragedy, and not one of them saw it as divine retribution. And those who pastor in New Orleans are eager to return so they can encourage their scattered flocks and rebuild the city.

The question is not why the storm happened. What we need to ask is: How do we respond? When evangelist Scott Hinkle heard people were drowning, he packed up and headed to Louisiana with a ministry team. When he got there he learned that thousands of nameless Christians had organized the most impressive relief effort in American history. By the time all the water is pumped out of New Orleans we'll have heard of a thousand more miracles—carried out by caring Christians who got out of their armchairs and proved that mercy triumphs over judgment.