

EDITORIAL: When hearts break, God stays with us

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A fresh report by a team of engineering experts constructs barriers for people who want to blame—or credit—God for the magnitude of destruction Hurricane Katrina heaped upon New Orleans.

Consider several options: (A) A heartless God randomly washed away innocent victims' homes, jobs and ways of life. (B) A wrathful God righteously punished the Crescent City for its wanton lifestyle, featuring strippers, drunks and flagrant debauchery. (C) Lazy and/or greedy contractors recklessly engineered the destruction when they built the levees that eventually gave way.

The answer is (C), human sloth, greed and “malfeasance,” according to the engineering report. It was presented to a Senate committee by Raymond Seed, a civil engineering professor at the University of California at Berkeley.



"These levees should have been expected to perform adequately at these levels if they had been designed and constructed properly," Seed noted in a story published by the *New York Times*. "Not just human error was involved. There may have been malfeasance."

Seed's team is following up on indications the levee specifications may not have been adequate to withstand such a storm. But they're also verifying eyewitness reports that contractors failed to drive pilings deep enough to hold the levees, used substandard soils, and cut other corners in constructing the \$450 million flood-control system.

The report acknowledges many factors contributed to the disaster. But after hearing the evidence, Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) noted: "Many of the widespread failures throughout the levee system were not solely the result of Mother Nature. Rather, they were the result of human error in the form of design and construction flaws, as well as confused and delayed response to the collapse."

This is thought-provoking news for everyone who has struggled theologically with the destruction heaped upon New Orleans by Katrina. It also offers implications for other struggles: When we wonder why bad things happen to good people. When we ask why a good and loving God could allow _____ (you fill in the blank).

In the face of natural disaster, people tend to blame or credit God. This is to be expected, since catastrophic events of monumental proportions seem

to be out of our hands.

God gets the blame when we think the results are unfair. When a baby dies of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. When a nonsmoker dies of lung cancer. When a storm wipes out a city and thousands of faithful people lose all their earthly possessions. These are the hardest theological issues, the greatest challenges to our faith. Theories abound. But the truth is plain: We don't know why. We'll never know why. But another truth gets us through. It's explained in Romans 8-my favorite chapter in all the Bible—which tells us that when we suffer, God suffers with us, and the Holy Spirit “intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express,” and which promises God “works for the good of those who love him,” no matter how bleak the circumstances. That doesn't tell us why evil pushes us to the edge of a cliff, but it gives us a ledge to stand on and a vine to cling to.

On the other hand, God gets the credit when we think the results are fair. One of the most petty and annoying examples of this was the fellow who praised God for sending the teeth of Hurricane Rita a few miles east of his home, sparing his property, as if God loves this man more than the families down the road. Plenty of people have given God credit for Katrina's havoc upon New Orleans, which has traded on its wicked heritage in return for tourist dollars. But I'm not so sure the per capita sin in New Orleans is any worse than it is in any city or village in Texas. Who does God hate worse—strippers or people who allow their state to rank near the bottom in the major indicators of child protection? Besides, thousands of New Orleans residents who suffered grievously are devout, church-going folks like you and me. I've met some of them. They're no worse sinners than your average Texas Baptist Sunday school class.

But as the engineering study shows, many calamities visit us because of our own “malfeasance.” People drink and drive. Teens take up smoking. Spouses cut with words. Some actions are more harmful than others, but they all have consequences. Many times—probably most times—God's

judgment on our sin is built into the natural repercussions of our actions. Still, Scripture teaches us God eagerly waits to hear our plea for forgiveness and our cry for help. And more quickly than a volunteer can turn the ignition in a disaster-relief truck, God is there beside us.

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