

# Tragedy reminds Biloxi Christians they need God and each other

September 19, 2005

Posted: 9/19/05

Alice Bowman, a volunteer from First Baptist Church, Martinsville, Va., is among those working in disaster relief at First Baptist Church, Biloxi, Miss. (ABP photo by Stretch Ledford)

# Tragedy reminds Biloxi Christians they need God and each other

**By Dee Ann Campbell**

*Associated Baptist Press*

BILOXI, Miss. (ABP)—“I’d been teaching others that we need to ask God to give us a spirit of brokenness and a heart to lean on him, no matter the circumstances,” said Ashley Austin, associate pastor at First Baptist Church of Biloxi.

For two years, he had been praying for God’s intervention in people’s lives. As a minister of education at his church, Austin had been teaching those under his leadership that, in order to be fully used by God, they needed to be humble and broken.

Now, Austin said, he is seeing God bring about that brokenness in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In the days following the storm, Austin, like most of the residents of Biloxi, has been struggling to salvage a few items from his home. Before the storm, he had moved his wife and two small sons inland, traveling to Arkansas for shelter. He returned two days later to assess the damage, finding the interior of his home totally destroyed by water more than five feet deep.

Six days later, as he pulled pieces of his destroyed belongings out into his yard, he talked about the struggles, the hurt and the lessons God is teaching his children through the pain.

“This is all just stuff,” he said, dumping a pile of flood-soaked toys into the heap, “but you know, it really hurts when you see the little gowns your

children wore at their dedication, or your wedding videos all ruined, or when you see the pictures of your kids when they were babies destroyed.”

A graduate of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Austin worked in student ministry at First Baptist of Biloxi for about five years. For the past year and a half, he has served as associate pastor. His ministry, he said, has been focused on teaching others to look to Christ in all circumstances and to reach out to others who are hurting.

“The most passionate thing I do is missions mobilization—teaching people to reach out to other people. Now people are reaching out to me,” he said. “I don’t have a house. All I have is my two cars and what’s inside them. I ride around with everything I own in my car.”

Like thousands of other Christians across the Gulf Coast, Austin is now on the receiving end of ministry.

“The people God has sent this way have been incredible,” he reported. “Ordinary people from all over America have stepped up to the plate and said, ‘I’m going to help.’”

“Some of the students who were in my student ministry a few years ago are now coming back here to help,” he added. “And eight college students from Lake City, Louisiana, filled up a large truck with water and diapers and brought it here the other day. We keep seeing things like that happen here. It’s been incredible.”

Within a few moments, a small truck loaded with hygiene items and other supplies made its way through the debris in the road, stopping in front of Austin’s home. The teenagers inside the vehicle, arms laden with Gatorade and toiletry items, handed Austin as many items as he could carry.

“We’re just thankful for the bare necessities,” he said. “We don’t need all the extra things we thought we had to have. We don’t need cell phones or

Coke or television. This has taught us what's important, and what's not. It's humbled us."

Austin has close relatives who remained in New Orleans through the hurricane—unaccounted -for relatives who may not have survived.

"I don't know if my dad is dead or alive," Austin said. "He was in charge of the inmates in a prison in New Orleans."

But even with the possible loss of loved ones, and through the loss of material possessions that had become so important in their lives, Austin emphasized that Christians are being broken and made more usable by God.

"I've met some of my neighbors for the first time," he admitted. "People have offered us a place to stay. We're all pulling together now. We need each other."

And, he said, Christians are being reminded, through tragedy and pain, that they need God most of all.

"We've prayed for the right kind of spirit for a long time," he added as he turned back to his work. "Now God's allowing us to be humbled, to be broken. He's just showing us he's in control. He's giving us a chance to show love to this city, and I'm excited about it."