

Mississippi

August 2006

“Be joyful always; pray continually;

give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thess 5:16-18 NIV

We were hardly on the ground in Mississippi when signs of last year's hurricane became evident, along with the amazing grace of our Savior God.

Yes, you could see the physical effects: down trees and debris fields of broken homes and household belongings; but the effects were also profound in the lives of the people. Two men who worked at the airport spoke of their appreciation that we had come to help them overcome the ravages of the storm. After 9 months of teams of people coming in and out of the airport in Gulfport, MS, these men recognized that we had come to help –and were appreciative. Their appreciation moved me deeply, but that was just the first of a number of lessons on gratefulness.

Shortly after we arrived at the base camp we were briefed about our assignment for the week –we were going to repair a section of a church building so that the congregation could have a place to meet in out of the weather and away from the insects. The one story, “T” shaped building was flooded nearly to the ceiling and had much of the roof tore off of the short section. Our assignment was to finish installing the roof (a contractor had begun this task, but had stopped work), close in the gables, put up a wall to separate the two sections (along with double doors for access), tear out the ceiling and a/c duct work in the long section of the building, frame in the window openings so screen material could be fastened over the openings, and install a temporary electrical connection.

While assessing our needs of building materials, the team met the Pastor of Greater Mt. Zion AME Church, Pastor Fields, along with the wife (Sister Sams) of the founding pastor who lived next door to the church property. Both of these dear folks immediately expressed gratefulness to us for coming to help them. Along with their grateful hearts, I noticed a twinkle in their eyes and a spring to the step; neither seemed to be wallowing in self pity or a “woe-is-me” attitude –these folks had hope, a lasting, tried, and tested hope that was alive. I was again moved deeply in my heart by what I was sensing from these dear folks.

Before we made our way back to the base camp, the team went to a temporary “store” called, The Pearl Mart; which had been set up in the gymnasium of the condemned, local elementary school. Their inventory of food and small household items are free to the residents. The Pearl Mart was also a clearing house for borrowing tools and obtaining small, basic building materials like nails and screws. This was the closest thing to a store of any kind for the folks of this small rural area (the closest “real” store was located about 12 miles away). Although I was grateful for the amount of donated items in this make-shift store and for the folks who gave of their time to keep it open –I was humbled by the lack of complaining we heard from the folks who managed this enterprise and

their desire to help others (I was also humbled by my heart that complains when Lowe's doesn't have the exact item I want, in their store stocked with 1000s of items).

The prevailing attitude of gratefulness and joy exhibited by our team also deeply impressed me. Working and sleeping in stifling heat and humidity; fighting off an army of crickets (and other rather large insects as well) 24 hours a day, and using well worn, borrowed tools in conditions that called for wearing a dust mask -were some rather difficult challenges. Our work site was filled with hot, sweaty folks serving others who had endured a tremendous storm, but there was also the unusual sound of laughter though muffled at times by our dust masks. But our team's attitude was so amazing and refreshing.

Jesus did direct us to, "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life...." Phil 2:14-16 NIV

Such an environment of joy flows from a heart filled with gratitude to God. Grace and gratefulness share the same "root word" -where God's grace is recognized and acknowledged, there will be grateful people. Gratefulness is a reflection of grace in the hearts.

In the midst of the ravages of the storm, I experienced the grace of God alive and powerfully present in the lives of people who were tried and tested. May the little bit of sharing in their suffering, along with seeking to be God's hand of healing –continue to work His grace deeply into my heart. Paul's words to us are true: Gratitude in the midst of trying circumstances does cause lives to shine forth with the light of the stars of the universe.

Pastor Dave