



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on May 2, 2011

Americans Find Faith & Charity in Tornado-ravaged South

Seven southern states were battered by the tornadoes — Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia, Louisiana, and Kentucky. According to New Zealand's *NZ Herald*, "It was the largest death toll since March 18, 1925, when 727 people were killed in storms that raged through Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana."



Of the many tornadoes that wreaked havoc throughout the South, at least one has ranked in the National Weather Service's most devastating category, EF-5. As ABC News reported, "[It] was the first [EF-5 twister] to hit Mississippi since 1966. The tornado, which hit Smithville, was a half-mile wide and packed winds of 205 m.p.h. It was on the ground for almost three miles, killing 14 and injuring 40."

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In Alabama, at least 248 people were killed in the tornadoes last week, while 34 deaths have been calculated in Mississippi as well as in Tennessee. Fifteen people were killed in Georgia, while five were found dead in Virginia. Two people were killed in Louisiana's storm, and one died as a result of the storm in Kentucky.

Thousands more were injured as a result of the storms — including nearly 1,000 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama alone. On April 30, President Obama arrived in the city, where nearly 50 people have been confirmed dead. Astonished by the scene confronting him, he declared, "I've never seen devastation like this."

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano also toured the hardest-hit regions and offered her condolences, as well as a promise of federal assistance. "This is not going to be a quick comeback or an immediate [recovery] but it will be, in my view, a complete one," she assured the victims.

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox labeled the devastation a "humanitarian crisis," explaining that nearly 500 city residents are still unaccounted for. Cadaver search dogs have already been deployed. "My sense is that we will have more fatalities," Maddox added.

More than 5,000 buildings were destroyed in just the Tuscaloosa area. Mississippi emergency officials report damage to more than 2,500 homes and 100 businesses. In Virginia, 500 structures were destroyed in five counties.

Predictably, looters have already been busy. "The first night they took my jewelry, my watch, my guns," reported Tuscaloosa resident Shirley Long. "They were out here last night doing it again."

Authorities in the city, overwhelmed by the conditions, have imposed a curfew on its residents. Also, National Guard troops have been deployed to control the looting.



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Alabama's Governor Robert Bentley dispatched 2,000 National Guard troops across the state to help maintain order as residents are still reeling from the impact of the storms. Troops blocked roads and patrolled the streets — with some even helping residents sift through the debris to discover any remaining possessions.

Carletta Wooley, 27, is one of the Alabama residents helped by the troops. "I'm going to cry," she said. "They've reached a lot of things I couldn't get to on my own."

Hoping to lift morale, Staff Sergeant Matthew Burbank and two other Guardsmen flew a tattered American flag that they had discovered in the rubble.

Meanwhile, President Obama declared Mississippi a disaster area, and qualified six counties in the state for federal funding. He also signed disaster declarations for Alabama and Georgia.

Across the South, police and fire departments have been destroyed, along with homes, businesses, and churches. In the state of Alabama alone, one million homes and businesses are currently without power. Officials in Hackleburg, Alabama are storing the dead bodies in refrigerated trucks because of a shortage of body bags. Damage estimates remain unclear, particularly as communications systems across the states have been destroyed by the storms.

Dozens of funerals took place over the weekend.

The Red Cross has opened up emergency shelters throughout the regions while authorities are overwhelmed by the task of having to secure permanent housing for thousands whose homes were destroyed.

Survivors cannot help but consider themselves fortunate to have lived through such a catastrophe. In Ringgold, Georgia, 66-year old Mary Lou Brown said that eight people in her neighborhood died as a result of the storms. She reported that as she fled down the stairs of her home to escape the tornado, a large oak tree fell onto the wooden roof over her front porch. According to Brown, the porch saved her life. "It's a blessing. My daddy built me this house," she said. "If I had not had that porch on there, it just would have gone through and I would probably have been killed."

Disaster victims turned to their faith in this time of need. The *Greenfield Reporter* [writes](#):

On the first Sunday after the disaster, believers streamed into houses of worship to give thanks for being spared, to mourn the dead and ponder impossible questions. Why did some survive without any explanation? Why did others die for no apparent reason?

Many people in this highly religious region saw God at work, even amid the devastation.

"God just put his big old arms around us," said Peggy Blevins, 59, of Rainsville, Ala. "I don't understand why he takes some people and leaves others. But I thank him just the same for protecting us ... To some people it might sound cold, but God does have a plan."

Others maintain similar faith, including Lisa Thompson, 37. "My faith is stronger now than ever," she declared. "I know God will test you, but it can't be [anything] but stronger." Thompson adds that she has received a great deal of support from volunteers in Tuscaloosa already, and says she plans to volunteer her own time as well.

Though many southern churches were destroyed in the disaster, faithful parishioners creatively turned other venues into areas of worship, including local stadiums and schools. The American Christian Academy, a private school in Tuscaloosa, hosted a service at the football stadium, where food, clothing,



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Bibles, and other supplies were distributed to desperate residents. “We’re hoping to feed them and give them some spiritual food,” said the school’s athletic director and pastor, Rob Cain.

Religious affiliations did not separate victims from volunteers. For instance, when Dustin Casey of Southern Baptist Disaster Relief arrived in Tuscaloosa to assist victims, his first encounter was with Macolee Muhammed. Muhammed confided in Casey her fears and frustrations, for which Casey offered prayer, wherein he thanked God for sparing Muhammed’s life and prayed that God would place hope in Muhammed’s heart and so that she would see “there is a light at the end of the tunnel.” Muhammed added, “amen,” gladly accepting Casey’s prayers, despite the gulf between her Muslim faith and his Christianity.

Southern churches have proven to be powerful refuges for those in need. Poplar Springs Baptist Church in Ringgold, Georgia, has been transformed into a help center of sorts, where volunteers are distributing bottled water and food, as well as lending out chainsaws to cut down trees.

In the wake of this devastation, Americans are once again proving themselves to be an exceptional people, both resilient and charitable in the face of disaster.

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