

## The Miracle of the 29

There have been many quotes and stories about miracles and to be honest with you, I believe we all have a different opinion of what a miracle really is. To some, it is the curing of a loved one who is terminally ill or the return of a son or daughter from a military assignment un-harmed and safely back home. It could be stated that giving birth to a son or daughter is a miracle in and of itself, and I certainly would not disagree for I believe this to be true as well. Since there is such a broad and diverse description of miracles as we know them to exist, I would like to describe in my own words the miracle I lived out for the past eight days. I believe it to be truly amazing and in fact am so humbled that I was allowed to be a part of it.

On April 05, 2010, just past 3:00 P.M. an explosion ripped through a coal mine in Raleigh County in southern West Virginia. It was the call for help that began the miracle lived out by many in the next eight days. For some it was not perceived as such for the traditional outcome of a miracle may not have been scripted the way it should have been. On this fateful afternoon, twenty-nine miners perished as an explosion so violent and not experienced in our industry in over 40 years touched the hearts and lives of our nation, and in particular the small community of Montcoal, WV. God allowed me to be a part of this for whatever reason, and now I am thankful to have been there.

As I arrived at the mine a few hours after this event, the best way to describe what was taking place was challenging to say the least. I am in no way being critical of what was taking place just amazed at the activity of placing rescue personnel and people in multiple locations for the sole purpose of locating and finding co-workers underground alive and bring them to safety. Since we alerted and sent seven complete and trained mine rescue teams to help, naturally I was concerned for their safety and was trying to determine how best we could provide assistance. We quickly learned our help was needed to help organize the process of staging teams and we immediately pitched in and developed a schedule for the teams present and those who were arriving minute by minute.

In critical times in the early event of a tragedy, information is vital. We had none and the command center was locked down to ensure miss-information was not distributed. This kind of notification can spread like an out of control brush fire and cause more damage that in some cases becomes impossible to repair the breach. So myself, like others, waited to be briefed by the command center and the opportunity to ask the critical questions we felt would arm our teams with the most knowledge possible. In the best of circumstances this is difficult, but when one adds the

magnitude of twenty-nine miners lost and feared dead to this equation, you could see and understand the agony on the faces of all who were involved.

As the schedule of team deployment was developed, the most feared conditions for a mine rescue team were encountered - the evidence of a fire and an explosive mixture of gas. Although the right decision to withdraw all teams from underground was made, those closest teams in this process wanted to continue exploration with the faint hope and expectation that life could be saved. The risk of their own lives was secondary to these men and all they wanted was to continue their explorations. The risk was too great so they reluctantly returned to the surface as commanded.

As the attempts and withdrawals due to conditions over the next several days repeated, the anxiousness of the teams, their stoic faces, and simple absolute resolve to not quit amazed me. Time after time, team captains who were physically worn out would come and volunteer their team to be moved up in the rotation to give the team ahead of them more rest. This is selflessness beyond comprehension to me. It is a story line that will never be printed in the media or filmed by a TV crew wanting the next update to broadcast about this tragedy. They are not interested in the people, only the story about the tragedy so they can misalign their print to cast shadows of insult and post negative comments about what we do. It amazes me how many experts are born instantly out of tragedy yet the opinions they express are not only not validated, they, for the most part, are not even remotely close to the events that are happening or their causation.

Once learned there were no survivors, I can only say this seemed to arm the rescuers with a new found determination. Recover their fellow miners. In this long and difficult process, many worked until almost the point of collapse, but would not give in to fatigue. They held firm in their resolve, and team after team willingly deployed with the sole idea it could not be finished until the last man was returned outside. Days that were endless and nights that were cold and without rest never waivered their determination and drive to succeed. They would simply not accept defeat!

Words could never be penned to express the appreciation, admiration, respect, and devotion these mine rescue personnel exhibited in this tragedy. Inside the secured gates, beyond the range of the camera lens, much removed from the reporters tape recorder, is where the miracle I am describing took place. It was not a miracle of saving lives as we always pray for in times like these, it was a miracle of men and women putting aside their personal beliefs and ethnic backgrounds to support a common and noble cause. Bringing our fellow miners, co-workers, and family members

back to their loved ones. Why I was chosen to participate is not nearly important as what I learned and was truly humbled by.

I met a man who worked tirelessly day after day to keep the eating areas clean and stocked with food or drink so we could be physically nourished. His comment to me after complimenting him and telling him how I appreciate all he had done for everyone nearly floored me. He said these words: "I have worked with these men for about 12 years and know them all really well. It is the least I can do for all of you who are risking your lives to bring them back to us." On the next to the last night I met another man that looked me in the eye to express his sincere love and admiration to me and all those who helped return his co-workers to the surface. He told me that one of the entire crews were saved and were Christian men. I stood there crying trying to figure out why me Lord?

So you see, the miracle in this case was not the story book ending where all were saved and everything was fine. The families of the loved ones lost, their co-workers and other friends will grieve as will I for days and weeks to come. It is a miracle, however, of a story that should be told. One of love, respect, and pure admiration of our fellow man. One of tireless devotion to serve others rather than ourselves and be quick to forgive and slow to condemn for we all make mistakes and are not perfect. When Christ bowed his head on the cross and said "it is finished" He made a way for our mistakes to be forgiven forever. As I prayed over the last men returned home aloud in the crowd of rescue workers and co-workers last night, I too said "it is finished." Our men are returned to our Heavenly Father and the true miracle was then recognized by me and hopefully others. Treat others as you wish to be treated, the Golden Rule was followed by these men and women behind the secured gates of the UBB mine during the entire process. Never the less, it was to me, the Miracle of the Twenty-nine who as they smiled down on these events of dedication and determination must have been thinking what our Lord said to them: "Well done my good and faithful servants."

Ken Perdue

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