

Triumph to Tragedy: A Real-Life Modern Parable

Franklin Church of Christ
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AM Worship

Introduction:

It was Monday morning January 2, 2006. While many of us were sleeping off our New Years Day celebrations, an explosion rocked the Sago coal mine in West Virginia, trapping 13 men. Throughout Monday and Tuesday, rescuers worked to clear the mine of poisonous gases, reinstate ventilation and find the trapped men. At about 8:00 pm on Tuesday, January 3, one body was found near the site of the explosion. This gave some a small amount of hope because the other 12 apparently walked away from the explosion. I doubt we will ever know exactly what happened in the following hours. However, at about 11:45 pm Tuesday, word came from rescue workers to the search command center that the 12 men had been found. Somehow the message came through that they were all alive. By 11:52 pm, despite the fact that no one from the command center had officially informed the families of anything, the Associated Press wired the news that family members say 12 of the miners are alive. About 30 minutes later, the AP wired that the West Virginia governor had said he had been told there were 12 miners found alive. On Wednesday morning about 8:30 am, I went in to the Mapco Express down the road to buy some coffee and saw USA Today's front page headline: "'Alive!' Miners beat odds." I was amazed. However, as we all know at 8:30 am everyone had known for approximately five hours that all but one of the miners were dead. Thursday's USA Today front page headline read: "Tragic turn stuns families." I have no desire to minimize this tragic event. My thoughts and prayers are on behalf of the survivor and the family of those who did not survive. Yet, as I considered the huge media debacle that occurred this week, I began to see it almost as a real life parable. Can you imagine what it would be like to be told your husband, father, son, brother, etc. was alive? Can you imagine believing you will see him walk through the door at any minute? Can you imagine having all of these feelings for three hours, praising God, singing, laughing, shouting about what a wonderful thing has happened and then finding out it wasn't true? What would that feel like? I can't imagine it. I think the biggest question in my mind would be, "How could this kind of mistake happen?" Then I remember **Matthew 7:21-23**. Here were people assured they would be in heaven for eternity. But when they arrived at judgment they heard, "I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness." They were stunned. Their overriding question was, "How could this happen?" Giving thought to this parallel, I would like us to note some lessons we can learn from the media debacle.

Discussion:

- I. Do not trust personal desire.
 - A. How could something like this major miscommunication happen? How could a coded message be misinterpreted or misheard and then spread so quickly it was on the Associated Press within seven minutes. Perhaps two quotes from the news can help us understand.
 1. Scott Lundeen, the ten O'clock news producer for HOI 19, an ABC affiliate in Illinois said, "The jubilation of it, you just wanted to believe it."¹
 2. In a news story by Bob Orr on CBS, Ben Hatfield, CEO of International Coal Group said, "There was desperation for good information. They wanted to share it."²
 - B. How does misinformation get spread so quickly and so confidently? People want to believe it. Sadly, this happens with God's word. How many of us believe things because we want to and not because we have confirmation from God's word about it. We must remember **Proverbs 14:12**: "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." Also, **John 8:32**, our wants and desires will not set us free from sin, only the truth will accomplish that.
- II. Do not trust personal conviction.
 - A. When the misinformation reached the families, someone began to ring the church's bells. The people began to sing "How Great Thou Art." People prayed and gave thanks to God. Then someone rushed in and said the miners would be brought to the church building to be reunited

¹ <http://www.hoinews.com/news/headlines/2151212.html>

² http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/i_video/main500251.shtml?channel=/elements/2006/01/04/national/videoarchive1177044_1_videosection_page.shtml

with their families. People began laying out a feast in the church's fellowship hall for what they knew would be 12 starving men. The family members believed the reports. They were certain their husbands, sons, fathers were alive. "We were looking for them to come through that door, man," said John Casto.³

- B. Our faith in something does not make it true. How many have the idea that because they believe something strongly enough, it must be true? Sadly, many people believe what is not true, basing their lives on it, and believe God will accept them because of their faith. However, we look again at **Matthew 7:21-23** and learn that our faith in something doesn't make it so. We have to believe *and* obey the truth.

III. Don't rely on "special" people.

- A. Listen to what some of the news media have said after they propagated the misinformation.
1. "Nightline" executive producer James Goldston said, "We didn't take the family's word for it. We had confirmation from two separate, very well-sourced people involved in the rescue, from a very high level. They both told us repeatedly the same information. We had five or six separate sources. By our reckoning it was enough to go with, and we went with it."⁴
 2. According to Mark Memmot of USA Today, West Virginia Governor Jim Manchin said, "They told us they have 12 alive."⁵
 3. Also according to Mark Memmot, "Jonathan Klein, president of CNN/U.S., said, 'two pretty good sources' had appeared to confirm the news: Manchin and Rep. Shelly Moor Capito, R-W. Va. At 12:28 am ET Wednesday, CNN ran an interview with Capito. Asked what she could confirm, she said, 'Twelve miners alive.'"⁶
- B. How many people defend their belief because somebody of seeming importance supports it? How many times have we heard someone went to seminary or Divinity School or they have studied the Bible longer than we have been alive, etc., they just can't be wrong? We must remember **Galatians 1:8-9**. If even an apostle or an angel from heaven teaches something other than what God revealed through the Spirit, they are accursed. It does not matter what even very special people or very good preachers say. All that matters is God's truth.

IV. Don't trust the crowd.

- A. Another excuse being offered by the news media is how universally accepted this news was.
1. Consider some statements in Mark Memmot's USA Today article on the media misstep, "Newspapers, wire services and cable news networks all failed in one degree or another to do their jobs properly... The collective failure... Other newspapers that put similar reports on their front pages in at least some editions include *The New York Times*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* and *The Washington Post*... Few of the stories raised doubts about the report's credibility... Many newspapers published accounts produced by the AP, which first reported at 11:52 pm ET Tuesday that "family members" said 12 miners were alive..."⁷
 2. Anderson Cooper, a CNN reporter on the scene said, "We have to rely on the facts as we gather them, all the sources we have access to... We were tightly controlled physically... No officials came to talk to us. There's only so much one can do. You get multiple sources, and when all of those people are saying the same thing, there's only so much you can do unless you see it with your own eyes."⁸
- B. How many people find consolation regarding what they believe, even when they see a Bible passage contradicting their belief by stating how many people agree with them? We need to remember **Matthew 7:13-14**. Most people will not accept the truth. We should not follow the majority. We should find and follow God's truth alone.

V. Trust the real authority.

³ http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-01-04-mine-cover_x.htm

⁴ http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001805596

⁵ Mark Memmott, "Media Misstep splashed across many front pages," USA Today, January 5, 2006, 2A.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001805596

- A. After seeing so much of what has been said while trying to figure out how such miscommunication can happen and such misinformation can be propagated, we come to one final conclusion.
 - 1. Consider again the quote from Anderson Cooper in the previous point.
 - 2. Also note what Greg Mitchell, editor of the trade magazine *Editor & Publisher* said according to Mark Memmott, “The job of reporters and editors is to stop and say, “We’ve got some possible good news, but it’s not confirmed yet,” ...”that really didn’t happen.” Mitchell says he thinks reporters and editors ‘got carried away’ by what appeared to be miraculous news. Newspapers were also under deadline pressure, he says.”⁹
- B. After saying that officials would not talk to the media, Anderson Cooper said, “There’s only so much one can do.” That is true, there is only so much one can do. I will tell you what one can do. One can wait until one has confirmation from the real authority before propagating a story.
- C. How many people believe teaching without carefully and patiently checking with the real authority, God’s Word (**II Timothy 3:16-17**)? How many people have we heard answer the question, “Where do you find that teaching in the Bible?” by saying, “I don’t know, but I am sure it’s in there”? We need book, chapter and verse for what we believe and teach or else we are no better than whoever it was who ran out of that command center with mistaken information and passed it on to those families waiting in the Sago Baptist Church building.

Conclusion:

Interestingly, everyone can see all of these points regarding the tragic story of 12 miners in West Virginia. Can we see them regarding our story and our relationship with God and His word? We must stand on God’s word, resting our faith in what God has revealed (**Romans 10:17**). Have you checked your faith with God’s Word?

⁹ Mark Memmott, “Media Misstep splashed across many front pages,” USA Today, January 5, 2006, 2A.