

## Scandals of Happiness (January 8, 2005)

Much of the news this week has been about the coal mining disaster in West Virginia. On Monday, an explosion trapped thirteen men in a West Virginia mine. One of the men was found dead early on, the other twelve being trapped about two and a half miles from the mine entrance.

It seemed that every bit of breaking news was bad. The air in the mine tested to be lethally toxic, no verbal contact with the men could be established, and hopes for the twelve miners' survival dimmed with the passing of each of the 41 hours they remained beyond the reach of rescuers.

But then there were the completely unexpected and joyous reports. The men were alive! All of them! The news spread fast and broadly. It was all over the television, and the print media ran with it. USA Today now has a "Dewey Defeats Truman"-type headline to their credit – their's reads "*Alive! Miners Beat Odds*" with photos of exultant family members. So does the Rocky Mountain News – they had two-inch type reading "*They're Alive!*" So does the Los Angeles Times – "*Suddenly, there is Joy – 12 Miners Found Alive*"

Of course you know it was all a terrible, colossal error. Only one of the twelve was a live, and him barely. But the family members rejoiced in the false rumor and rested in the error for over three hours before they learned the devastating truth. A CNN report included a statement by a witness who described the mood as one of "jubilation, incredible happiness, unspeakable joy."

We can well can imagine the happiness of those people in that three-hour period. Can you imagine the cell phone calls that must have been made? The hugs that must have been shared? The euphoria? The laughter? The tears of joy? The praises to God?

I would think that if you were to consider only that three-hour period; if you could isolate it from what was to come; for many (if not most) of those people it was the happiest three hours of their lives. But it was a happiness not grounded in truth. It was a happiness that the truth would soon obliterate and destroy.

The photos from the mining tragedy have been in their own way gruesome – grotesque. I'm not speaking of graphic photos of the dead, thankfully there have been none. I'm talking about the awful photographs of family members whose hopes had been dashed, family members who are drowning in grieving despair at the moment the shutter clicked. They are hard to look at when they appear on TV or on the computer screen.

But do you know what I find even harder to look at? It's the photographs from the three hours of euphoria! They are even more heartbreaking; more cruel!

Of course now the story is running on two tracks: There is the underlying and prior story of the mining disaster itself, the causes of the explosion, the possible culpability of the mining company, and things like that. And there is the secondary story about how the false news of the miners' survival got started, and how it could have gone on so long without being corrected. Both are tragedies, and both are scandals.

The Bible is not lacking in parallels to both of these kinds of tragedies and scandals: There is the underlying and prior story of the fallenness and sinfulness of man, and the terrible consequences of the same. And there are the secondary and later scandals of false assurance, of happiness without a foundation in truth, and of silence on the part of those who know the uncomfortable truth.

The uncomfortable larger truth is that through one man's disobedience sin entered into the world, and death through sin. Thus Adam and his descendants separated themselves from the Giver of Life, and the creation itself fell when Adam fell. It was brought into a morally and spiritually perverted state. Although it had been made as the perfect environment for man, now it would yield its fruits to him only

unwillingly. He would wrestle his living from the earth by the sweat of his brow. And in the end – separated from the God who gave him breath, he and all his descendants would be reclaimed by the earth, dust to dust (as the Bible says), and as the English Book of Common Prayer embellishes, “earth to earth,” and “ashes to ashes.”

But our forefather Adam cannot bear the whole fault, however, because we prove to be his sons and his daughters every day and everywhere. The Bible says and experience confirms that *“all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God,”* and that *“the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 3:23; 6:23). The Bible goes on to say that even once we have died, we are not done with our sin problem. *“It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,”* it says in Hebrews 9:27. So after death there is judgment according to our deeds, and this before a God who is holy and righteous and pure, and who hates evil.

The judgment of God is hidden to us behind the veil of death, but the rest of what the Bible teaches about the sinfulness of man and the fallenness of Creation is plain to see. We see the curse upon the earth writ large in things like angry tsunamis that swallow up thousands upon thousands, and we see it in the microcosm in things like miners scratching out their living by the sweat of their brows and the grime on their faces.

We see the sinfulness of man on every page of every daily newspaper – whole sections devoted to aspects of the fall: the crime section devoted to lawlessness, the obituaries devoted to death, even the editorial pages devoted (at least half) to lies & liars.

The world is a lot like that West Virginia mine was on the weeks before the explosion – lots of problems; lots of sins being swept under the rug, while business goes on as usual. The Bible teaches that the moral and spiritual conditions of life on earth are unsafe! And that an explosion (of a kind) is certain – only the timing is in doubt.

The same Jesus who said comforting, winsome, and attractive things like, *“Come to me all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* also said, *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.”* (Matthew 25:35-39).

In other words, before the judgment of the flood came, they were living large. They were enjoying life. They were genuinely happy, but it was a happiness built on a sense of security that was false. They did not know that the judgment had already gone out.

I’ve read that there were 208 safety violations at the at West Virginia mine in 2005, the implication being that the mining company was courting disaster by their neglect. If an analogy can be drawn, how many violations have there been in 2005 & every year against the honor and glory and commands of Almighty God? In how many ways are we courting His judgment?

When it comes, will we be able to plead ignorance, or will people look back and say that we ought to have seen it coming? The book of Revelation (6:9-10) pictures a heavenly prayer meeting of the martyrs, but their prayer meeting is a little different from ours. Revelation has them praying in a loud voice, *“How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”*

The sinfulness of mankind, and the fallenness of the Creation is going scandalously under-reported, ignored even by the church that finds a more positive message more pleasant, and more marketable.

But there are also some secondary scandals. Even when the truth is so alarming, people are living and are encouraged to live with false hopes, and false assurances that everything is just fine! . . . that everything is going to turn out wonderfully after all!

There is the world selling the mirage that he who dies with the most toys wins. Jesus said, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). And Jesus goes on to illustrate the principle in a parable, “*saying, 'The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.*” (Luke 12:16-21).

I want to suggest that in the moments (how ever long they were – hours? months? perhaps even years?) before he was rudely interrupted by death, the man was happy, assured, comfortable. But happiness alone is not enough – a happiness that is built on a foundation of sand is a disaster waiting to happen, and those whose happiness is built on a mirage are like those poor West Virginia families whose three-hour happiness was built on a falsehood.

No one looks back with fondness upon that kind of happiness, for it sickens them that they rejoiced in a falsehood. No one will look back and say, “*Well, at least we were happy for a little while – better than no happiness at all!*”

Even in the church, wealth and prosperity can breed a false sense of spiritual complacency. The church at Laodicea received this message from the risen Christ himself (through a vision to the Apostle John): “ . . . *you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked*” (Revelation 3:17). But before John delivered the terrible news that Jesus was disgusted with their church, they felt pretty good about things. Feeling pretty good about things is of NO VALUE, if it is not in accordance with the truth.

It is truly a scandal that some actively encourage and nurture this kind of false happiness by assuring people that they are rich toward God WHEN THEY ARE NOT. Jeremiah prophesied against the religious leaders of his day, who for greed (we might call it marketability) preached a pleasant message: “*For from the least of them even to the greatest of them, Everyone is greedy for gain, And from the prophet even to the priest Everyone deals falsely. And they have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, Saying 'Peace, Peace,' But there is no peace.*” (Jeremiah 6:14). The prophet Ezekiel compares “feel-good” religious leaders to those who plaster over a wall and whitewash it. It doesn’t really make the wall stronger, but it does make it look better (and I suppose, feel better about itself). So is the religious leader whose talent and method is to assure anyone and everyone that God disapproves of NOTHING; and that God’s answer to EVERYTHING is a great big hug.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy to preach it straight, “*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,*” (2 Timothy 4:3). Do you know that there are churches (or organizations that call themselves churches) that actively teach that the content of your faith has NO BEARING whatsoever on your relationship with God, or on your eternal destiny? Do you know that there are many people who call themselves Christians who do not believe in the deity of Christ, or in His substitutionary death for sin, or in His resurrection from the dead? And do you know that there are churches that support their lack of faith in these doctrines?

Do you know that there are churches (or outfits that call themselves churches) whose central organizing principle is to give divine sanction to certain sexual perversions? They will tell you and assure

you every week that God has no problem whatsoever with what the Bible calls sin – and that it is those who would make you feel bad about yourself who are truly worthy of divine condemnation. They are all about giving dignity to debased things, and about glorying in what should shame. They are saying PEACE (with God) – when there is no peace. Someone is issuing false information (in fact, lots of people are), and the false information is a cause of comfort and joy for many, but it is an unfounded comfort; a false joy that is certain and destined to turn to bitterness.

There is still another scandal – and it is this: there are people who know the truth, and who are remaining silent. The West Virginia mining company CEO has said about the false report debacle, *“In the process of being cautious, we allowed the jubilation to go on longer than it should have.”*

I don’t want to be so cautious with the gospel, that I allow the lost to go on their merry way on the broad path that leads to destruction longer than they should. I don’t want to wave at the cars as they go by, when I know full well that the bridge around the next curve is OUT. I dread the thought of someone saying to me, or even thinking about me, *“Why did you let me go on so long?” “Why didn’t you tell me?”*

What could I say? What could any of us say? *“Well, you seemed to be having so much fun.” “You seemed to be enjoying yourself so well.” “You seemed pretty happy.”* They might well say, *“I was!” But it was a sandcastle in the air! And you knew it!”*

Everyone feels empathy for those poor families in West Virginia who were taken on such a cruel roller coaster ride, but I also feel sorry for those who had to burst their bubble with the truth. Can you imagine being the one who had to step to the microphone and tell people that their loved one, whose miraculous deliverance they had been celebrating for three hours, were in fact dead – and had been dead since before their rejoicing began?

But our sharing of the gospel is not nearly as hard as that. The poor man in West Virginia had nothing but bad news to give. After he gave the bad news, nothing he could say could mollify their anger or grief.

But the gospel is good news! Oh, it has to start with some unpleasant realities, some uncomfortable truths about our true condition, but that is never the end of it! The gospel is not condemnation! The gospel is *“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool”* (Isaiah 1:18).

Yes, the gospel begins with the unpleasant news that our sins are as scarlet – that it is as if we have blood on our hands, but that’s just the first half of the sentence! There is always a second half! The bad news is never the whole news. Though you are guilty before God, you can trade your guilt and sin for the very righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, and there is NO condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Though your sins have separated you from God, you can have peace with God through faith in Christ, and you can have it NOW! Though you are under the sentence of death, you can have life everlasting. And you don’t have to work for it – you have only to receive it; to take it; to accept it.

I have had people tell me, *“But I’m happy without Jesus.” “My life is pretty good already.” “I don’t need religion – I’m happy already.”* You may be. You may be. But when the full truth comes to bear in your life, at the end of life, you will look back on this happiness and curse it, just like those miners’ families that are so angry, who feel so abused to have been deceived into rejoicing during a time more fit for mourning.

A few weeks ago, a doctor gave me some alarmingly bad news – not as bad as news from doctors can be, but bad enough! He was kind of abrupt. He said something to the effect of, *“You’ve got bacterial pneumonia, and in another day or so you may have died.”* I’ve got to tell you, it was kind of a downer. It made me even unhappier than I was when I got there.

But I am sure glad now that he didn't hold back on me, because he didn't want to upset me, or because he was afraid I would react negatively toward him. I'm even glad he didn't talk about other things, and wait until the subject came up more naturally.

I'm glad because it was coming to grips with the bad news that motivated me to take advantage of the good news – that I could get some antibiotic shots and take some antibiotic pills that would interrupt the natural course of things; and take me off the disastrous path I was on.

When you are sent forth to preach the gospel, not only out of this church but by the Lord of the church, it is not to condemn and find fault and nitpick and tut-tut-tut at what is wrong with everybody else, any more than it is the job of physicians to merely tell everybody how sick they are. That wouldn't be much of a doctor who only did the latter, and that isn't much of a Christian who only does the former.

The physician's job is to do what he can to heal, and the Christian's job is to introduce people to the great physician – the answer to sin, the way to peace with God, and the hope of life everlasting. Therein is a happiness that is built upon the Rock, and which will not be washed away by the truth.

“Father in Heaven, give us courage, please, to both face the truth and tell the truth: the truth about our separation from God apart from Christ; the truth about the hopelessness of the human condition apart from the salvation you freely offer in Your Son. Give grace to those who have yet to receive the free gift of eternal life in Christ that they may do so, and give those who have already received a holy boldness to tell the truth and share the gospel. Lord, give us Your wisdom so that we do not mistake boorishness or clumsiness with boldness, and so that we do not mistake cowardice for caution and tact. Help us be like Jesus in our witness, who was both bold and winsome, and who did not come to condemn but to save. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.”

Later that morning, my personal rdg in the Bible carried me to GN 11- where Abram goes down to Egypt, passing his wife Sarai off as his sister, so that he wouldn't be killed by those who would desire to take possession of his beautiful wife. The Bible says that men remarked to Pharaoh that Sarai was quite the looker, and so Pharaoh "took her into his house." Later Pharaoh himself says that he took her as his wife. It is also probable that Pharaoh had showered Abram with wealth as a kind of payment for the privilege of Sarai's hand.

SO here was Paharaoh – who no doubt had imagined that he had things pretty good. Living large and life was good. Happy – but based on a falsehood. For a time, he did not know that he was under the judgment of God.

Go first and make amends with your neighbor

Jerusalem, Jerusalem,

Father forgive them for they know not what they do

Happiness is not enough. If happiness is not founded and grounded in TRUTH, it is a mockery and a heartbreak and a horror.

Xians have faced the what if of their happiness being unfounded. If Christ is not raised, we are of all men the most to be pitied.

Sometimes Xians say, even if it is not true, it has given me a happier, wholesome etc. life. Not enough.

But what if you're happiness is a sandcastle in the air?

Did not know that you are blind and naked etc etc

Depart from me, I never knew you

Peace when there is no peace.

## **Joy Turns to Heartbreak as 12 Miners Confirmed Dead**

### **Only One Lives as Initial Reports of Multiple Survivors Prove Wrong**

TALLMANSVILLE, W.Va. (Jan. 4) - In a stunning and heartbreaking reversal, family members were told early Wednesday that 12 of 13 trapped coal miners found were dead -- three hours after they began celebrating news that they were alive.

The devastating new information shocked and angered family members, who had rejoiced with Gov. Joe Manchin hours earlier when a rumor began to spread that 12 miners were alive. Rescue crews found the first victim earlier Tuesday evening.

"They knew the odds that were against us, and with that, to have the ending as it did with this high euphoria, I can only say there was no one who did anything intentionally other than risk their lives to save their loved ones," Manchin told ABC's "Good Morning America."

The sole survivor of the disaster, identified by mining officials as 27-year-old Randal McCloy, was hospitalized in critical condition early Wednesday, a doctor said. When he arrived, he was unconscious but moaning, the hospital said.

Charles Green, McCloy's father-in-law, told ABC that McCloy was suffering from hypothermia and was on a ventilator, but didn't suffer any broken bones. There was no carbon monoxide in his body, he said, despite concerns about high levels of carbon monoxide inside the mine.

When he found out his son-in-law was the only survivor, "I was still devastated," he said. "My whole family's heart goes out to them other families."

Thirteen miners had been trapped 260 feet below the surface of the Sago Mine since an explosion early Monday. The mine is located about 100 miles northeast of Charleston. As rescue workers tried to get to the men, families waited at the Sago Baptist Church during an emotional two-day vigil.

But late Tuesday night, families began streaming out of the church, yelling "They're alive!" The church's bells began ringing and families embraced, as politicians proclaimed word of the apparent rescue a miracle.

As an ambulance drove away from the mine carrying what families believed was the first survivor, they applauded, not yet knowing there were no others.

Though the governor announced that there were 12 survivors, he later indicated he was uncertain about the news. As word buzzed through the church of survivors, he tried to find out what was going on, he said.

"All of a sudden we heard the families in a euphoric state, and all the shouting and screaming and joyfulness, and I asked my detachments, I said, 'Do you know what's happening?' Because we were wired in and we didn't know," Manchin said.

International Coal Group Chief Executive Officer Ben Hatfield blamed the wrong information on a "miscommunication."

"It's sorrow beyond belief," Hatfield said during a news conference.

The news spread after people overheard cell phone calls, he said. In reality, rescuers had only confirmed finding 12 miners and were checking their vital signs. At least two family members in the church said they received cell phone calls from a mine foreman.

"That information spread like wildfire, because it had come from the command center," he said.

Three hours later, Hatfield told the families that "there had been a lack of communication, that what we were told was wrong and that only one survived," said John Groves, whose brother Jerry Groves was one of the trapped miners.

"There was no apology. There was no nothing. It was immediately out the door," said Nick Helms, son of miner Terry Helms.

Chaos broke out in the church and a fight started. About a dozen state troopers and a SWAT team were positioned along the road near the church because police were concerned about violence. Witnesses said one man had to be wrestled to the ground when he lunged for mining officials.

Company officials waited to correct the information until they knew more about the rescue, Hatfield said.

"Let's put this in perspective. Who do I tell not to celebrate? I didn't know if there were 12 or one (who were alive)," Hatfield said.

The explosion was the state's deadliest mining accident since November 1968, when 78 men -- including the uncle of Manchin -- died in an explosion at Consol's Farmington No. 9 mine in Marion County, an hour's drive north of here. Nineteen bodies remain entombed in the mountain. It was that disaster that prompted Congress to pass the Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969.

It was also the worst nationwide since a pair of explosions tore through the Jim Walter Resources No. 5 mine in Brookwood, Ala. on Sept. 23, 2001, killing 13.

Federal Department of Labor officials promised an investigation. Acting Assistant Secretary David Dye, who heads the Mine Safety and Health Administration, said it will include "how emergency information was relayed about the trapped miners' conditions."

The 12 miners were found together behind a barrier they had constructed to block carbon monoxide gas. They were found near where the company had drilled an air hole early Tuesday in an attempt to contact the men.

The miners had stretched a piece of fabric across an area about 20 feet wide to block out the gas, Hatfield said. The fabric is designed for miners to use as a barrier. Each miner had carried a breathing apparatus and had been able to use it, according to mining officials.

The hole also was used to check air quality in the mine, which revealed high concentrations of carbon monoxide. The odorless, colorless gas can be lethal at high doses. At lower levels, it can cause headaches, dizziness, disorientation, nausea, fatigue and brain damage.

Manchin, who had earlier said that the state believed in miracles, tried to focus on the news that one had survived.

"We're clinging to one miracle when we were hoping for 13," he said.

*Associated Press writers Vicki Smith, Allen G. Breed and Mark Williams in Tallmansville contributed to this report.*

## **1 Thessalonians 5:2-4 (New American Standard Bible)**

### **New American Standard Bible (NASB)**

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<sup>2</sup>For you yourselves know full well that <sup>(A)</sup>the day of the Lord will come <sup>(B)</sup>just like a thief in the night.

<sup>3</sup>While they are saying, "<sup>(C)</sup>Peace and safety!" then <sup>(D)</sup>destruction will come upon them suddenly like <sup>(E)</sup>labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.