

It was a miner miracle

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The rescued Chilean miner José Henriquez acted as the group's 'pastor'. He gives his eye-witness account of their three months underground to **Sarah Meyrick**

FEW recent news stories have grabbed the world's attention quite as intensely as the unfolding human drama of the 33 Chilean miners last Autumn, trapped 700m underground after a catastrophic explosion.

At first, it was feared that none of the men could have survived. Even if they had escaped the blast, they had little water and barely any food. It took 17 days of painstaking searching before a message finally reached the surface which read simply, "*Estamos bien en el refugio los 33*": "All 33 of us are well inside the shelter."

Even then, amid the rejoicing, the miners and their families were warned that rescue might take until Christmas — holding out the prospect of a further four months of incarceration in a space the size of a small flat, and in temperatures of 32°C.

In the event, the ordeal ended in October, 69 days after the explosion. One by one, the men emerged into the daylight, out of the escape capsule and into the arms of the families who had kept watch at the pit-head ever since the accident. They were also watched by President Sebastián Piñera and his ministers, and — thanks to the 1500 or so journalists at the scene — an estimated billion people around the world.

Considering such a dramatic story of unlikely triumph in the face of disaster and despair, many have described the rescue as "miraculous". Not surprisingly, perhaps, several of the miners dropped to their knees to thank God as soon as they reached the surface. But José Henriquez, the 24th man to make it out of the mine, is in no doubt at all that the improbable rescue was a gift from God, and a direct answer to prayer.

Mr Henriquez spent the last week of January visiting UK churches with the Revd Alf Cooper, the Chaplain to the President of Chile and a CMS mission partner, who, on President Piñera's behalf, led the prayers of the nation during the miners' ordeal. In comparison with the pictures taken immediately after the rescue, Mr Henriquez now looks the picture of health. When I ask how he is, he smiles broadly. "How do I look? I am very blessed in my recovery."

THE day of the accident started like any other, he says, although he and his colleagues were not totally surprised by the explosion, because of the conditions under which the mine was operating.

"We heard in the early morning a few tell-tale sounds. Some small rock falls had been going on for some time; so we notified the authorities," he says.

"Then at two o'clock there was an extraordinary explosion. It was sudden and tragic. We could only see a metre in front of us — it was four hours before we could see through the dust."

Once the dust had settled, the men began to assess the situation. Their first priority was to establish whether everyone had survived.

“We were very worried. Some of the others had gone out of the immediate area, and we thought they’d been caught in the blast,” he says. “Thank God, we discovered that all had escaped; no one was killed. We began looking for some escape route. There was none. Then we needed to organise ourselves, as a survival mechanism.”

The miners were in no doubt about how bad things were, but there was little time to think: “We looked around. The light in our lanterns was dimming; so we took the batteries from the crushed lorries and began repairs. That gave us more light. Then we looked for water and food.”

As the jobs were being distributed, some of his colleagues turned to Mr Henriquez for help. “They knew I was a Christian. They said, ‘Don José, you are the man to lead us in prayer.’ I said, ‘No problem, but we Christians pray to a living God. If we are going to pray, we will do it the way I tell you.’

“We came to the conclusion that though we had lost everything, we hadn’t lost the possibility of prayer. There was no human way out; we had to dedicate ourselves to prayer.

“So we formed a circle and started to pray. The first prayer circle was that very afternoon. And the last thing we did that night was pray.”

IT IS hard to imagine how the men got through the next 17 days, without any contact from outside, and little hope of rescue. There was only enough food for three days — tinned salmon and sardines, some biscuits, and some rancid milk. And the drinkable water ran out on the first day, leaving them dependent on industrial water normally used for drilling. It was extremely hot down there; and, although fissures allowed some air in, there was little oxygen.

Apart from the first day, Mr Henriquez says that the worst moment was when, ten days in, they realised that the first search drill had failed to find them. “We heard it coming, but it missed us, and our spirits crashed . . .

“It was terrible. Everyone thought that the people outside would think we were dead. We knew that they couldn’t go on drilling, because of the expense. It was like looking for a needle in haystack.”

Added to this, they knew the mine could collapse at any moment. Naturally, some of the men began to despair. “By now we were not in a good state. People began to think there was no hope. They were very demoralised. Not many, but one or two, began to write goodbye letters and wills. I said ‘No, don’t do this. Let’s pray, trusting God.’”

His own faith was deep-rooted. Growing up in a Christian family, with a pastor for a grandfather, he had been a committed Christian for 25 years. In his 33 years as a miner, he believed God had delivered him from previous experiences of rockfalls and landslides.

“I always believed we would be rescued. God told me about the drilling. He showed me in prayer the exact spot the perforation would come through. I was very confident we would be saved.”

Meanwhile, the prayer circles continued. “I had already noticed that God’s blessing came through praying. His presence was with us. That is why we say the 34th miner with us was Jesus. As we began to pray, people began to open up. They promised to return to him.”

And then, at last, on the 17th day, came the “miracle”. “The second drill should have missed us, too,” he says. “The maps were wrong. But as it came down, it hit a rock and the divine hand moved it towards us. Everyone agrees this is an amazing thing!

“This was the first great answer to our prayers. We were humbled before God. It was as though we had touched God’s heart. He answered our prayers, and our clamour came before him. We knew that down would come his blessings.”

ON THE surface, where the desperate families were encamped, awaiting developments, there was rejoicing, of course. The Chilean government had been bracing itself for bad news. Ten days into the crisis, Mr Cooper, the Bishop’s Chaplain, remembers a senior official approaching him to warn him that the miners would by now have run out of food. “We can’t go public with it yet, but it seems there is no hope,” she said.

It was still another week before the drill broke through. Mr Cooper is also convinced that that the hand of God guided the drill bit.

“We all believe that was a great answer to prayer,” he says. “The engineer, André Sougarret, who was the brains behind the rescue but is not a believer himself, said publicly, ‘In the drilling process, things happened that held no logic within engineering.’ He attributed it to an energy generated through prayer and good will.

“All of Chile erupted in joy when we heard the words, ‘We are alive and well — all 33 of us.’”

THE breakthrough changed everything. The success of this second drilling meant that edible provisions, water, electricity, and even a television (in separate parts, to be assembled by the mechanics below ground) could all be lowered down to the shelter through a narrow tube.

“And Bibles,” Mr Henriquez says. “Tiny ones that fitted through the tube. They were necessary so that I could preach with greater authority and depth, and provoke an interest in people.”

After the initial euphoria, the news that the miners might yet have to hang on until Christmas before being set free plunged some into fresh despair. “There was a feeling of great disillusion. We kept trusting that something would happen.”

Contact with the outside world meant that for the first time the men began to appreciate that their plight had become a national and international story.

It also allowed them to speak to the President and the Minister for Mining. “We said, ‘Please don’t abandon us.’ He said, ‘Don’t worry, we are going to look after you, whatever the cost.’ This was very reassuring. We were keen to know the government was doing this, because the mining company would never do it.”

So the drilling continued, as the rescuers worked round the clock to drill the third, larger hole through which the men would finally be rescued. In response, the men redoubled their prayers.

“We had suddenly started to get God’s blessings. But there’s always a tendency to forget the blesser. So we decided to carry on the prayer discipline, twice every day, at 12 noon and six p. m.,” says Mr Henriquez. “Everybody joined in. One or two found it difficult, but they were there, and participated.”

He continued leading the prayers, singing and preaching the message. He ran a basic Bible-study course. “Then I thought it was time we did something,” he says. “It became necessary to

make an appeal. So I invited a pastor to join us from outside through a video link. At noon prayers, he preached to them and gave them the opportunity to decide for Christ. And I thank God that 22 of the miners made a clear decision for the Lord Jesus Christ, inviting him into their lives.”

He believes that finding, or rediscovering, Christianity profoundly changed the rough-and-ready miners: “The wives who were in touch with the men started saying that their husbands had changed. They were talking about God, when they never used to, and they were treating their wives kindly. That was very precious for me.”

Finally, as many of us saw, the men came out, and the world cheered. What was it like, emerging into the sunlight? “It was just so obvious that our prayers had been answered. I was overwhelmed and excited,” he says. “What seemed impossible had become real.”

As for the future, he is uncertain what it holds. The 33 miners, who come from right across Chile, are uniquely bound together by their experience, and have certain commitments to each other. Gifts and offers have poured in. Right now, while Mr Henriquez is on tour, the rest of the miners and their families are enjoying a free trip to Disney World.

“I have been offered all sorts of other jobs, but I now seem to have become a preacher,” he says cheerfully. “The real job I want is to tell the truth about those months in the mine. Who knows what might have happened had we not had the prayer meetings?”

The rescue timeline

5 Aug — A cave-in leaves the miners trapped nearly half a mile underground in a small copper and-gold mine near the Chilean city of Copiapo, 500 miles north of Santiago.

6 Aug — Chile’s mining minister, Laurence Golborne, arrives to lead the rescue effort. Rescuers begin descending through a ventilation shaft.

7 Aug — Rescue workers are forced to abandon their route following a fresh collapse.

8 Aug — Rescue workers begin drilling five-inch wide bore-holes to try to locate the miners.

19 Aug — A drill reaches the level where the miners were believed to be, but does not hit the shelter.

22 Aug — Rescue workers hear tapping on the drill. When it is pulled out, there is a note attached that reads: “All 33 of us are well inside the shelter.” The miners have access to about 1km of tunnel, and have split into three groups to eat and sleep.

23 Aug — Food, water, and medicine are lowered along with rehydration tablets and high-energy glucose gel.

27 Aug — The miners give a video tour of their cave, which is shown to relatives who have gathered at Camp Hope near the mouth of the mine.

31 Aug — Rescuers begin drilling a preliminary test hole.

2 Sept — Drilling is suspended for several hours because of geological faults. Engineers suggest a rescue within four months could be optimistic.

8 Sept — The miners watch a football game between Chile and Ukraine. The Chilean players wear T-shirts that say “fuerza mineros”: “miners be strong”.

14 Sept — The wife of 29-year-old miner Ariel Ticona gives birth to a baby girl. He watches the birth on a video link, and they name her Esperanza, “hope”.

24 Sept — The miners mark 50 days trapped underground.

25 Sept — The first of three rescue capsules, built to lift out the men, arrives at the mine.

9 Oct — Jubilation above and below ground as the rescue shaft reaches the miners.

11 Oct — A test rescue capsule is successfully sent nearly all the way down to where the miners are trapped.

12 Oct — Final preparations and test are carried out. The rescuer Manuel Gonzalez is lowered down the shaft. Shortly before midnight, 31-year-old Florencio Avalos, the first miner to be freed, enters the rescue capsule.

13 Oct — Mr Avalos reaches the surface amid scenes of celebration. José Henriquez is the 24th man to make it out of the mine.