

Buried Alive in an Avalanche, Young Man Sees Prophetic Miracle Deliverance

I was being buried! I couldn't believe that an avalanche could happen where we were!

Those were Matt Walsh's thoughts on Saturday, Feb. 8, as the avalanche swallowed him up and left him buried alive under nearly 3 feet of snow in an icy tomb. "I figured I was going to die," he says. And by human logic, Matt was right. The odds of surviving were slim.

Matt Walsh, 17, and his brother, Michael, 19, are the sons of Pastor Mike and Becky Walsh of Glad Tidings Assembly in Powell, Wyo. But the two are more than brothers—they consider each other best friends. When they talk about each other, the honest emotion of the bond is telling.

Michael, who works on rigs in the North Dakota oil fields, had come home to spend some time with family, friends, and particularly his brother, Matt.

"Michael's a tough kid," his father says. "He's 125 feet up in the air, working on rigs in 30-below weather. It's hard, dangerous work."

But this day, Michael was home and had volunteered to help set up a kids' hunt, putting pheasants out in the field. It was snowing, near blizzard conditions, when he got Matt's text asking him if he wanted to go snowboarding on the Polecat Bench. It was an invitation he couldn't refuse.

Swinging by the house, he picked up Matt. The conditions outside would have put a majority of Americans in survival mode, but it didn't faze either brother. Snow and four-wheel

drive off-road vehicles are a part of life in Wyoming—and Michael's Ford F-150 Raptor was capable of going even where most other four-wheel drives dared not go.

Polecat Bench is not a typical snowboarding mountain, at least not by Wyoming standards. Instead it is an elevated, flat area of land that has relatively small cliffs and gullies streaming down its sides. Some areas are gradual inclines, but other areas—the areas a snowboarder looking for some quick runs might seek—are quite steep and can run about 500 feet long.

Driving along the edge of the bench, Michael was looking out his window for a suitable spot. They saw some gullies, but at first nothing that promised much of a ride.

"Then we saw an area that looked perfect," Michael recalls. "I got out of the truck and looked—the snow was so deep and fluffy looking. I waved Matt out of the truck, and we both did front flips off the edge of the bench into the snow to check it out."

Looking at each other, they agreed. "Let's do it!"

Matt, being closer to the truck, was able to get strapped onto his board first. Michael looked up and saw him standing there.

"What you waiting for?" he asked.

"You!" came the grinning response.

Laughing, Michael said, "Go ahead, dude. I'll catch up!"

Matt, a junior at Powell High School, nodded and leaped off the edge and onto the powder, hitting and falling backwards in a slide.

Michael good-naturedly laughed at his brother's failure to keep his feet, but then things suddenly went from funny to mind-numbing disbelief.

"I saw cracks in the snow in front me," Matt recalls, "and then everything began breaking and I was in an avalanche."

On the leading edge of the snow, Matt made it safely to the bottom of the hill, not realizing what was right behind him.

Michael, on the other hand, was in a near panic. After his brother had jumped, he saw the mini-avalanche begin, but then suddenly, "pop-pop-pop"—the whole ridge of snow he was standing on let loose.

"When the avalanche first started, it threw up a whole cloud of snow, so I lost sight of Matt," Michael says. "Then the ridge I was on started to go, so I threw myself backwards on my board to keep from getting sucked down too."

"I got to the bottom on top of the slide," Matt says. "Then all the ledges and snow below the ledges came down on top of me. It hit me with a lot of force. I knew I was getting buried. I just couldn't believe that could happen where we were. I remember it hitting my back and feeling it going around me and getting deeper and deeper. I had no idea how deep I was, but I figured I was probably too deep to get out with the equipment we had."

Being totally surprised that the bench area was even capable of an avalanche, the boys were not wearing transponders and didn't have search poles. Michael quickly got to his feet—scanning the 100-yard-long, 200-yard-wide area for any sign of his brother, but he was gone. He had no idea where Matt was, and the sun would be setting soon.

"I never felt so hopeless or helpless in my life," Michael says, the emotion strong in his voice.

Matt, now buried under nearly 3 feet of snow, figured he was as good as dead, the once-fluffy snow already hardening about him like an icy body cast. His hood, however, bought him some time, as it left an air pocket for him to breathe.

"I was really calm and really peaceful," Matt says. "I honestly never felt so close to God. I was not frightened or scared. I tried to get out, and with every bit of strength I had, I tried to wiggle as much as I could ... but I could only move one arm. Everything else was frozen tight."

"Then the Lord spoke to me," he says, "and reminded me of the prophecy."

"It was a Sunday and we were at church," says Becky Walsh. "I was four months along with Matt, but I felt a heaviness. I got home from church, and I started to bleed. I called the hospital, and they told me to just wait it out and come in in the morning."

She recalls a doctor telling her over the phone that she was losing the baby—she was having a miscarriage.

"That night, Mike went to church and I stayed home," she says. "After church, Mike brought some of the youth kids over, and they prayed for me. One of the kids then prophesied, 'You're not going to lose that baby because God's going to do great things with him.'"

The bleeding stopped. Matt would go full-term and be born completely healthy.

"During the prayer, I could sense an anointing," Becky says, "and when the prophecy was given, I knew that it was going to happen."

For all his life, Matt has known about this prophecy—and had lived in it with expectation. And now, when faced with impossible odds, he firmly, calmly held to God's promise.

But for Michael, the instantaneous and powerful emotional mixture of deep loss, fear, disbelief and confusion left him, for a moment, paralyzed with shock.

"The only thing I knew to do was cry out to God and ask, 'What

should I do—call search and rescue or go find him?'" Michael says. "God spoke to me, 'Go find your brother.' I followed His orders. I didn't think about it—I ran down the hill, and chunks of snow the size of my truck were still coming down around me."

Meanwhile, Matt knew he was still sitting in an upright position, so with his free arm he started digging, a handful at a time, up into the compacting snow above him, taking the hardening snow and packing it into his small air pocket by his face. But no matter how he struggled, his arm just wasn't quite long enough to reach the surface.

And then the miracle.

Michael, who had raced down the hill, scanning for any hint of Matt, stopped to call for him. He had no idea where Matt could be. He took another step and heard Matt's voice.

"The heel of his boot actually sank into where I had been digging, and I could see it," Matt says. "I called out, 'Mike, I'm fine! Mike, I'm fine!'"

"I stopped yelling for a second, and I heard Matt," Michael says. "I looked down, and there was this little tiny hole about the size of a baseball in the snow. I started digging frantically in the snow."

Using his hands, it took Michael about 30 minutes to finally free his brother from the snow, explaining that the snow was frozen like concrete but that Matt was in a surprisingly good mood, cracking jokes the whole time.

"When I found him, I broke down and cried," Michael says. "I was so happy—the fear and heartache I just experienced were gone!"

Michael and Matt say that during the whole rescue process, portions of the hill kept collapsing, yet the rivers of snow

didn't come their way. The next day, however, when they returned to show their family where Michael had dug Matt out of the avalanche, there was no sign of the hole—the rest of the ridge had collapsed, burying the area under several feet of additional snow and debris.

"I was pretty much in shock until we got home for dinner," Matt admits. "Then it hit me how real, how dangerous, how blessed we were to be alive—it was pretty emotional. For me, this just confirms the prophecy and God's calling."

"My brother definitely has a calling on his life," Michael says. "He leads worship, leads in youth group, and is so talented. ... I didn't want to see that go to waste—because he's going to do something great for God!"

Yet as the news of the miraculous rescue spread, Michael and Matt, who were never ones to seek the spotlight in the first place, quickly tired of the attention.

"I told my boys, as they were getting tired of the publicity," Becky says, "that the time is now—this is when people want to hear your story. Shout it from the rooftops—let them know what God did!"

And so they have, sharing how God saved their lives through online interviews, newspapers articles and even a television appearance.

"I pray for my boys all the time," Pastor Mike says. "I pray for His protection constantly upon their lives. This is a confirmation that God is hearing us. God is so amazing!"