

Line upon Line



Lost Five Days in a Mine: The Astonishing Story behind the New Movie

By [Maurine Proctor](#) · September 6, 2024

Everyone had given up on ten-year-old Josh Dennis, missing for five days, except one man.

The Faith of Angels, a film by Garrett Batty, comes to theaters throughout Utah September 12, and to theaters nationwide September 26. To get your tickets, [CLICK HERE](#).

It was already dark when Josh Dennis's scout troop had finished setting up camp and were squeezing their way in small laughing groups into the Hidden Treasure Mine in Utah's Oquirrh Mountains in that September, 1989. The mine was a chaotic labyrinth of shafts, chutes, pockets and tunnels on six different levels that wound some eight miles into the mountain. Since the scouts had been armed with safety rules and flashlights, the adventure loomed not as dangerous, but enticing, a scout's dream come true.

An engaging and tow-headed ten-year-old, Josh was still a Blazer and technically too young for the camping trip, but with his scoutmaster Dad, Terry and three other boys, he trekked down the long, black mine shaft where the flashlight beams played off the rough walls and the chatter and hooting of other scouts echoed. Then, Danny, a visually-impaired scout, who was disoriented by the long shadows and dark corners could go no farther. "I'll take you out," Terry volunteered. "Do you want to come with us, Josh?" Josh hesitated only a moment before he shook his head, saying he'd go ahead with Cary and Tyler.

Josh turned to tag along behind the other scouts, who, not realizing he was planning to follow, had moved fast. They were already a long way ahead, threading their way deeper into the mine without him, their voices growing dimmer. Turning back, Josh saw that his father, who had taken the flashlight, was already out of sight with

Danny. Josh focused his eyes on the scouts' flashlights ahead, and hurried to catch up. He thought if he moved quickly enough, he'd be with them soon. However, in an instant they turned a corner, and their light disappeared, leaving him utterly alone in the blackness.

He started back toward the entrance again, blindly groping his way down what he was sure was the tunnel. Without any light he was immediately disoriented. The farther he went, the more confused he became, and he stopped for a few minutes until it fully hit him. He was lost and he was worried, though not panicked. At that instant, he knew by instinct what to do. "Dear Heavenly Father," he prayed. "Please help me to be all right."

Josh continued feeling along the wall, yet he didn't seem to be coming any closer to the mine entrance. No distant light offered any hope. Several times he stumbled against broken planks, and he slogged through unseen puddles that froze his feet in the chilly air. He covered a distance and still no hint of the mine entrance. Finally, he took a turn that lead him up a slope. How steep it was he couldn't tell, but at last he settled on a ledge to wait for help, certain now that he couldn't find his way out alone. Josh hunched down against the cold wall and prayed again, a little boy's whispered words in a silent cave, "Help me."

Lost

Nobody seemed to know where Josh Dennis was. When Cary and Tyler emerged from the mine, he wasn't with them, and Terry, growing more anxious with every passing moment, started asking every cluster of scouts that emerged from the cave, "Have you seen Josh?"

They said he wasn't in the mine; they said he wasn't in camp. Everyone was questioned and faces were blank. Terry was sure Josh was still in the mine somewhere, and so the scout leaders, some of them expert rappellers, went back into the mine searching pockets and crannies, dropping ropes down chutes and climbing down to check every forgotten hole. Josh, who apparently hadn't gone that far into the mine, now seemed somehow to have vanished.

By two thirty a.m., the Tooele County sheriff had been notified and some search and rescue were on site. By morning, 40 people were searching for Josh, questioning and questioning again everyone there. "Who last saw Josh?" It was all to no avail. Terry hoped Josh would be found before he had to notify his wife, Janeen, but as the desperate hours passed with no sign of Josh, it was clear she had to be told.

Telling Mom

It was late Saturday afternoon and Janeen Dennis, having run some errands, was just pulling into her driveway when a neighbor came up to her and asked, "Have the police gotten in contact with you yet? Have you heard? Josh is lost." The police and neighbors had been looking for her all over West Valley City, paging her at superstores, calling the malls. Now she was here, but nobody had details. As two of her friends drove with her west to Tooele County, the phrase kept drumming in her head, "Josh is lost. Josh is lost." As they got closer to the mine, a helicopter flew overhead and Janeen thought, Maybe they've found him already and he was being taken to the hospital.

As Janeen arrived at camp, however, the enormous gravity of the situation became clear. She saw her husband, Terry, who normally never cried. He was sobbing.

John Skinner

Long-time Tooele County resident and history buff, John Skinner, heard about the little boy that was lost in the Hidden Treasure Mine Saturday evening when he arrived back in town from Montana. Since John's grandfather had been the superintendent of the mine, and he had grown up exploring its hidden recesses, somebody at the sheriff's office thought he might have a map. He reported to the sheriff's office immediately volunteering his help, but a deputy said a map had been found, and everything was under control.

"Have you found him?" John asked. They hadn't, and he wondered how things could be possibly under control. How is it that they couldn't need his help? He decided to go up to the mine and see for himself, but only made it

up to Stockton where the road was blocked. No, they didn't care how well he knew the mine, he wasn't needed there.

By Sunday, the entire nation knew about the ten-year-old lost in a mine in Tooele, Utah, and the news reports were grim. Not a trace of the boy could be found. Many were becoming sure he wasn't in the mine, but had wandered off somewhere into the gulches and draws of the surrounding mountains. Gas stations and convenience stores sprouted signs, "We love you, Josh." The Dennis home and yard was covered with yellow ribbons. Dogs had been brought to the mine to sniff out the youngster, and people everywhere wished their imaginations didn't travel so vividly to a black hole where a terrified little boy lay thirsty, freezing, and starving.

In priesthood that Sunday morning, John Skinner was praying for Josh, and something kept telling him that he had to get up there, that he had a key to finding the boy. He took a drive one more time to Stockton and one more time was stopped. If nobody needed John Skinner up by the mine, why did he feel so urgently that they did?

The Search Falters

Each hour that passed lessened Josh's chances of being found alive, and Janeen and Terry knew agony. During the day Janeen could keep her composure, but she lay awake crying all night. Terry, unable to eat, was growing weak. An idea kept impressing itself upon Janeen, so much so she started asking members of the rescue team about it. "Josh has gone up. He's up somewhere. Could he have crawled up something? Could he have hiked up a hill?"

Another thought returned again and again. On the way up to the mine, her neighbor, whose own daughter had been in a devastating car accident, had said, "Remember when you can't carry this burden anymore, ask the Lord to carry it for you." Staggering under the load of grief, Janeen was having to learn what that meant.

Turned Away

As Sunday turned into Monday, whenever John Skinner had a moment, he prayed for Josh, and the news media reported that few people still assumed that Josh could be in the mine. Searchers had combed every inch of it, their ribbons strung back and forth in multiple colors marking the places probed. Nothing. Today the search was opened for volunteers from the community to comb the surrounding hillsides. The numbers swelled, and Janeen Dennis' eyes anxiously scanned the hillsides looking for a flash of blue that could have been Josh's coat. But John Skinner, still pushed with the sense that he could find the boy, was not allowed near the mine. Having been turned away twice on the Stockton side of the mountain, he hatched an idea. He decided to go up the mountain on the Ophir side on a different unguarded road, and then go into the old Buckhorn mine which he knew connected with the Hidden Treasure.

Once in the Buckhorn, it took him hours to wind his way through the nooks and crannies of the abandoned mine. When he got to the place where the two holes joined, fallen timbers and rocks made it too dangerous to cross. He was foiled again.

As John came down the mountain on Monday night, he stopped for a soda. On a napkin, he drew a picture of the mine for a waitress and pointed out the place the thought Joshua Dennis was lost. She asked what scores of his friends had asked, "You've got so much knowledge; why don't they let you help them?"

John couldn't rest. He prayed, and he felt all but compelled to try again. On Tuesday, he finally made it up to the camp, and it was his worst encounter yet. "I know this area. I know the mine," he pled with authorities. "If you don't leave now, we'll escort you out," a deputy told him.

That night the newspaper read "Hope Fading Fast for Local Boy Lost Four Days," and Janeen and Terry, with hearts sinking, began to plan Josh's funeral. Some were saying that shortly the entrance to the mine should be blasted shut so that nobody could ever be lost in there again, It was a bad night for John Skinner, as a discouraging cloud sunk over his spirit. He kept praying about it, and three areas of the mine kept coming to his mind. When the television reporters said that authorities were becoming certain that Josh Dennis must have left the mine and gotten lost or met with foul play, John shook his head. He can't have gotten out of that mine with

no lights. He's got to be in there. Maybe if he'd been less aggressive about it, they would have let him help. But now his involvement seemed hopeless.

Don't Give Up

John hardly slept that Tuesday night, tossing and turning and praying. When he awoke on Wednesday morning, he had an entirely new feeling. He was going to go up there, no matter what, and find Josh. As his wife later said, "Wild horses wouldn't have stopped him."

Wednesday was the last day of the search. A Utah Power and Light team from Carbon County, with high-powered, sophisticated experience in mine rescue, had been called onto the scene on Tuesday, and still the ten-year old had not shown up. Team member Ray Guyman had vowed, "If that boy is in there, we'll find him." Now, even his determination was waning as their repeated searches turned up nothing.

The UP&L team was standing by a truck, scanning a map of the mine. when John Skinner approached them, "Have you looked in the resolute stope?"

"You sound like you know this mine," one said.

"I do. My grandfather used to be the superintendent here."

"We've needed you. Where have you been? Would you mind coming in with us for one last sweep before the rescue efforts wind down?"

The Search

It was 2:00 in the afternoon when Janeen, Terry, and their bishop and his wife knelt around the bed in the hotel room pleading through tears with God for Josh's life. Janeen said, "It was a prayer with real intent. and you could feel that it connected." At that same hour, John Skinner finally got into the mine, and while some who followed scoffed and went off different directions, Ray Guyman and Gary Christensen followed John.

They went to the first of the three places that John had been impressed to look. Nothing. They went to the second place. Nothing again. As they went to the third spot in the mine, they were talking and calling, "Josh, Josh," and suddenly Ray Guyman, who was deaf in one ear said, "Shh. Did you hear that?" They became still and listened. A faint cry came, "Help."

Different colored ribbons hung everywhere, showing that the area had been checked and rechecked by scores of people. How could the little boy have been missed? But the cry came again: "Help."

Cold chills went down John's back. He'd always known it. The boy was alive. For five days and nights he had held on. Neither terror, nor dehydration, nor hunger had taken him. Josh had seen their light and was able to answer. They climbed up a thirty degree angle, and Gary Christensen was the first to get him, a little boy sitting on a ledge with ruffled hair and a dirty face.

He had sunken eyes from dehydration and rocks in his hands because in his dreams he was eating a hamburger and drinking Sprite, but no sight could have looked better to three rescuers than Josh Dennis. "We'll take you out to your Mom and Dad,"

"Only my Dad's here, not my Mom. She's back home," he said, in a sentence whose meaning they would only later come to understand.

Found

Josh emerged from the mine to television cameras rolling, cheers, and weeping. By this time, the lost scout, who had seemingly vanished without a trace, had become a focus of the nation, and his rescue was a felt miracle by millions.

Janeen and Terry were resting in their motel room, when a knock came at the door. “Josh is alive. He’s been found.” She just looked toward the heavens and wept, “Thank you.” They arrived at the hospital before their son, and one of Janeen’s first views was of the blue coat she had strained to see on the mountain while searching for Josh. It was Josh, pale and tired, his toes frostbitten, and in that moment of exhilaration, Janeen thought, “He’s so dirty.”

Terry, who in his grief and stress had hardly eaten in five days, collapsed, and they put him on a gurney, too. Josh looked toward him and with the earnestness of a ten-year-old asked, “Oh, were you lost, too?”

Answered Prayers

Amidst the hubbub of greetings that surrounded Josh, he beckoned to Janeen and whispered, “Mom.” She leaned over, and he whispered something that he never again would remember or repeat, “There were angels with me.”

Headlines everywhere announced that Josh had been found and that he had prayed for help. Readers imagined the trauma of a helpless child at last coming to a happy end, but only his closest family and friends would ever know the rest of the story. He later described how he felt after his first prayer, “I knew that my Heavenly Father would protect me, no matter what. I didn’t panic. I didn’t feel like my life was in danger. I was calm and I never doubted.”

For Josh it had been like floating in a bubble of protection. He had gone to sleep shortly after he had been lost, and awakened only once in awhile, when he heard a distant sound or felt uncomfortable. He hardly felt hungry or thirsty, and even though at the hospital they thought they might have to amputate his frostbitten toes, he hadn’t felt cold. Nothing about the experience was traumatic for him. “It seemed to me like I had been lost only a few hours, when suddenly I saw a light in the distance and heard someone calling my name,” he said.

The reason he was surprised to hear that both of his parents were outside, worried about him, was because he assumed it was still Friday, or maybe Saturday at most. “It’s not Saturday, Josh. It’s Wednesday,” a rescue worker told him.

Josh Dennis had more than overcome the odds against death by exposure or dehydration, he had seen a miracle. And in God’s masterful economy, his remarkable experience answered the needs of many others. Ben Lemon, an off-duty policeman, who had scoured the mountain searching, prayed his heart out for Josh, and vowed, “If this boy is found, I will change my life and go back to church.” He did and years later told Josh, “It’s because of you I have my two beautiful daughters.” The new bishopric in Josh’s ward had been seeking in prayer the solution to how to unify the ward. Josh’s experience bonded his ward like few other things could have.

Janeen Dennis had been praying for challenges to help her grow, and she came to understand dependence on the Lord like she had never before experienced. John Skinner had wondered if he knew and understood when the Spirit spoke to him.

After his days of quiet urging to go find Josh, when nobody thought they needed him, he would not need to wonder that again.

Mission Farewell

Exactly nine years to the day since he emerged alive from the mine, Joshua Dennis sat on the stand at church at his mission farewell prior to his departure to Honduras. When Elder John Madsen of the First Quorum of Seventy arose to speak, the same faithful Josh who had so courageously endured five days in a mine, understood his experience in a new way.

“What does it mean to search?” Elder Madsen asked. “There’s someone in this audience who knows, and his name is John Skinner, because over and over again he was moved to try and get into that mine, and he was thwarted at every turn, but he could not be restrained.”

“I believe it is our responsibility to search, to do whatever it takes and never give up. If we search the holy scriptures, we find out they are true. If we search the commandments, we find their promises will be fulfilled. As Joshua goes on his mission to Honduras, he will search, and he will not quit searching for those who sit in darkness and are waiting to be found and brought into the light.

“Josh will do whatever it takes to be a rescuer and bring souls to the one who truly rescues. Jesus Christ. The greatest rescue of all time was performed by the son of God who gave His body and His blood that all mankind might be redeemed.”

At Thanksgiving, while Josh was still in the MTC, he wrote John Skinner a letter. “I’ve been pondering in my mind all day,” said Josh, “the things that I’m thankful for, and the list never ends. I thought of you when I read this scripture in Mosiah 7:12, ‘I am very thankful before God this day that I am yet alive, and am permitted to speak and I will endeavor to speak with boldness.’ P.S.,” Josh ended the letter, “I’m glad you know what it means to search.”

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This article was written 25 years ago, so here’s the update. Josh Dennis is a stake president today.

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