

The Journey

Many years ago I started out on a journey to climb a certain mountain. I had heard of this mountain for many years and had read about people who had climbed it. There seemed to be a special quality about their lives that attracted me. So one day I decided I would find out for myself what this mountain was all about.

As I approached the mountain, I could see that, although it was very high, it was even more massive in the area it covered. There was only one road to the mountain and one trail leading up. I stood at the base of the mountain looking up awed by its enormity wondering how I would ever find my way to the top and if I would have the strength and stamina to make it. I was afraid and even considered not starting the climb.

Just then I heard a voice behind me. "You do not have to go alone. I know the mountain very well. I will go with you and be your guide and companion."

I turned to see a fairly tall muscular man with deeply tanned skin. At first I thought he was a young man because his face was without wrinkles except for those caused by his smile. But when I met his eyes, they seemed old and wise. His voice was warm and gentle, almost fatherly.

I felt safe with him so decided to go.

"Thank you. I will take you up on your offer as I don't know the way myself," I replied.

"Good," he said, "but I must warn you of a few things. Once you start, you cannot go back. If you leave the trail, you cannot retrace your steps. You can only go forward."

So we started out on our journey. Although I did not know it then, it was a journey that would consume the rest of my life.

Up the dirt trail we walked. Then the trail leveled off and passed through a lovely meadow. We stopped to enjoy the bright yellow flowers. We walked over a little wooden bridge crossing a small stream. We stopped again to watch the trout flitting about in the clear water. Then we continued on our way.

It looked like the trail was leading into a grove of aspen trees. I loved aspens with their silvery quaking leaves. But as I looked out over the meadow, I saw some pretty orange butterflies. "What kind of butterflies are those?" I asked out loud and then, without a thought or a backward glance at my companion, I took off running after them. But as I ran I tripped over a rock and fell to the ground clutching my ankle. It hurt so badly. Now how would I climb the mountain? I looked back at the trail where my companion stood, watching me patiently.

"Help me, please!" I called out. And so he came. He took a bandage out of his pack and explained to me how to wrap a sprained ankle as he was doing it.

"Now I will show you how to make a crutch." He went a ways away and then came back with a stick that forked on the top. He smoothed the bumps down with his knife, and wrapped the fork with a cloth. Finally he helped me to my feet.

I asked, "Can we go back to the trail over there and go on to the aspens? It's not very far."

That's when I learned that if he said something, that's the way it was. He meant business, because he replied, "No. I told you that you can't go back, only forward. There will be other aspens, but not now."

"But there is no trail here. How can we go on. How will we find our way?" I asked.

"There is another trail near here, but to get to it we must cross a river", he responded.

So I hobbled along as best I could on my crutch to the river (actually more of a large creek.) But it was too deep and the current too swift to wade across.

"How will we get across?"

"We will cut down a tree to fall across and crawl over on the log."

"No way! Not me!" I replied, "That's too dangerous."

"Well then, you can stay here on this side and eventually die."

I still didn't like the idea, but I could see I didn't have much of a choice. "Ok," I said. "What do we have to do?"

He removed two axes from his pack and we set to work. It took a long time. My back ached and I had blisters on my hands. I was hot, sweaty, and thirsty. Finally I heard a crack and he yelled, "Timber!" The tree fell right across the creek. It was a large tree and not very many branches near the bottom so most of the span over the creek was fairly smooth.

"I will go first," he said, "then you follow, doing as I do."

He sat on the log straddling it and worked his way across. When he got to a branch in the way, he cut it off so it would be easier for me. Soon he was on the other side calling "Come! the other trail is right here."

I looked at the creek and the rocks being hit by the rapidly running water. I didn't want to do it, but I had to. Finally I sat on the log as he had done and started across. The spray hit my face and got it wet, while my feet dangled in the water at times. I didn't like this one bit. I would not run after butterflies again, at least not without his permission. Slowly, I inched my way across. I seemed like forever, but finally there was his strong arm reaching out. He grasped my hand and pulled me to my feet. He put his arms around me and held me awhile. I was so scared, I was shaking.

When I finally calmed down, he asked gently, "Are you okay?" I nodded and we turned to walk down this new trail heading off into the dense woods. I was afraid and asked if he would hold my hand because it was so dark. He readily agreed and I felt secure with my hand in his.

Eventually we came out of the woods and to a fork in the path. My guide started down the left fork, but I hesitated. On the right was another aspen grove. I missed out on that before. I wasn't going to again.

"Can't we go this way?" I asked pointing to the right fork.

"No, the trail we are to take leads to the left," was his reply.

"But I want to go the other way," I insisted.

"Go then if you must. But it will not be as you think." So I took the right fork. Soon I was among the aspens. They were so pretty with the sun twinkling on the leaves as they twirled in the breezes. The air was so fresh and I felt so good.

I said to myself, "I guess my guide doesn't know everything after all. This is a lovely trail and it's still going up. I'm sure I can get to the top this way. Besides, this trail is so easy. There aren't even any rocks to trip over."

But after only a short while, the trail started going down and the next thing I knew, the ground started getting wet and swampy. The trail grew fainter and fainter. I was getting a little apprehensive when suddenly, on the next step, my feet started to sink into the mud. I struggled to free myself, but I kept sinking deeper and deeper into quicksand. I was in big trouble. I only hoped that my guide could still hear me as I screamed at the top of my lungs. "Help, help!" I hoped he not only could hear, but would have compassion and forgive my disobedience.

"Help!" again I screamed. "I'm sorry I doubted you. I'm sorry I wouldn't listen to you. I'm dying. Please come. I promise I'll obey you from now on."

Then I heard a voice behind me calm and reassuring. "You will be all right. Here, turn and take hold of this branch and let me pull you out."

He pulled and tugged and finally I was out.

"My, you are a mess," he said gently.

I looked at myself, covered head to toe with black mud. I looked awful and felt awful. He led me over to a patch of clear water. I washed up and felt better and hopefully wiser.

Finally I asked, "Now what do we do? I know we can't go back."

"We go through the swamp to the next trail."

"Oh no!" I moaned. "Not more quicksand."

"If you follow me exactly and obey my instruction, we will make it through safely."

So, across the swamp we went with water and mud up to our waists in some places. He carried a long stick to test the ground before we walked on it, and I was very careful to put my feet exactly where he had put his.

Mosquitoes buzzed around my arms and head and stung without mercy. My legs were scratched by underwater sticks and twigs. Once we were through, there were leeches in the water that had to be pulled off. It was a very unpleasant experience and I still shudder when I think of it now.

Finally we got to firmer ground and there was a little trickling creek and that emptied into the swamp. We washed up well, then sat and rested. Another lesson learned, I hoped. He knew the mountain and the trails better than I did so I'd better trust and obey him. I did not want to take a trail by myself anymore.

So again we walked and again the road forked. I looked to him immediately. "Which one should we take?"

He smiled and said, "It's your choice. Both are good trails and I will walk either one with you."

I looked down each one. There was another aspen grove on one and I wanted to go there, but I was afraid to choose that way after my last experience. The other trail led around a bend and I couldn't see where it went.

"What is on that trail?" I asked, pointing to the one going around the bend.

"A beautiful view of the mountains across the valley," he answered.

But the aspens still drew me. "Are you sure it's okay?" I asked taking a step towards the aspen trail.

"Yes! Do I need to push you?" he replied smiling.

I laughed and said, "Maybe."

So we took the trail to the aspens. This time the trail continued through the aspens for some time. We had some good conversations and both really enjoyed the experience. I was getting to know my guide better and there was a lot more to him than I first guessed. We held hands as we walked, but it was out of comradeship not out of fear this time.

The trees thinned and we came out on the top of a cliff. I could see the mountains across the valley.

I turned to him and asked, "But this path led to a beautiful view too."

"Yes, both paths led to the same place. That's why it didn't matter which path we took," he replied.

I looked over the valley, but couldn't quite see the bottom of it. In my curiosity I wondered if there were lakes, rivers or what at the bottom, so I inadvertently left the path and got closer to the edge to see. But as I peered over the edge, the ground under me gave way and I started sliding. Stones rolled over the edge and I clutched at loose grass as I fell. I thought this was the end. But bushes on a ledge about ten feet down stopped my fall. I was caught in the bush and couldn't get up.

I called up to my guide and companion, "Please help me. I didn't mean to leave the path."

There he was looking down at me with a kind but sad expression on his face. "Again?" he said softly (more to himself than me) shaking his head slowly.

I felt sheepish and didn't want to look up at him. I also felt rather foolish sprawled out stuck in the bush. When I realized how ridiculous I probably looked, I started laughing. Then I noticed he was laughing too as he pulled a rope out of his backpack. I assumed he would throw it to me and pull me up and we would be back on the trail and on our way, until the next thing I knew, he was standing on the ledge next to me.

"Aren't you going to pull me up?" I asked.

"No", he replied.

"Then how do we get out of here?"

"We go down."

"Down!" I shrieked, looking over my shoulder at the hundred foot drop below me. "Down! You must be kidding."

"This is as good a time as any for your to learn rappelling," was his only response.

And so he proceeded to help me into the rappelling harness and explained how to work the ropes and to kick off the side of the cliff wall. Then he dropped down a few yards to give me a demonstration.

"Okay. Now you do it."

"But can't we please go up?" I pleaded. "It's only ten feet up."

"No. Remember once you leave a trail, you cannot go back. The next one is at the bottom of this cliff."

Seeing he would not relent, I asked, "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Only if you do exactly as I tell you to do."

And so I learned to rappel. It was scary at first, but by the time we reached the bottom, I was sort of enjoying it.

"Will we do this again?" I asked, hoping we could.

"If you want to, but not for awhile," he replied.

There, at the bottom of the cliff, was the trail as he had promised. It led around the base of the cliff for some time before we came to another fork in the trail. He stood still and I waited for him to choose, but he said nothing.

Finally I asked, "Where does this trail go?" pointing to the trail on the left, which seemed to continue around the base of the cliff.

"It leads back up the cliff and involves a lot of rock climbing," he replied.

"What about the other one?" I asked pointing to the right.

"It leads down to a river," he responded.

I had my fill of high places for awhile and climbing rocks seemed awfully hard. The trail to the river sounded so much easier and more pleasant.

"Can't we take the trail to the right?" I asked.

"If you really want to. Yes. But it may not be as easy and as pleasant as you expect," he said.

But I had already made up my mind, so we took the trail to the river. It was a lovely trail, soft to walk on and strewn with pine needles. There was the sweet fragrance of Ponderosa pine in the air. Soon we could hear the noise of the river. We walked along the river for awhile, but the trail came to a bridge crossing the river. The bridge was very old and rickety and did not look safe.

I looked questioningly at my companion.

He responded, "You wanted to come this way. You will have to be the one to try it."

"But can't you go first?" I pleaded.

"No. It was your decision. You must go first."

So I stepped up on to the bridge. It shook as I put my weight on it. I took one step, (Okay so far) then another, holding tightly to the side rails. but on the third step, Crack! The board underneath me suddenly broke and I fell, still clutching the side rail which had come loose in my hand. I fell into the swirling water. Not knowing how to swim, I floundered screaming for help. The next thing I knew, a hand grabbed mine and I was standing on the bank soaking wet, coughing, sputtering, and shaking.

My companion put a warm blanket around me and told me to sit while he make some hot tea to warm me up. By now I realized we could not go back and I knew we would have to cross the river.

"Well, what is our next move?" I finally asked.

"We will have to build a raft and float downstream through the rapids and cross to the other side."

I knew it! More work! He was right. Rock climbing would have been easier.

So we worked, cutting trees, chopping off branches, and smoothing the logs. My back was

killing me and my hands looked like raw meat. Then we had to lash the logs together and I knew that that was only a beginning as we still had to cross the river with its rapids. I didn't want to think about it. I was so tired and discouraged. I sat down, put my head in my hands and just cried.

He came and sat next to me. Putting his arm around me and said, "You are tired. Rest now. When you are refreshed, we will leave. It will be okay. I know the river as I know the mountain. I know the location of every rock and hidden danger. If you listen to me, we will make it safely across."

Soon I was rested and feeling much better as he said I would. Well, this would be some adventure. We rolled the raft to the river on roller logs. Then dragged it into the water. We had made a rudder on the back to help with steering. He placed me in the front with a paddle while he controlled the rudder.

"I will steer," he said, "but sometime I will need you to help. Paddle when I tell you to paddle."

"Ok," I replied, only too glad to obey. I wasn't going to take matters into my own hands at this point.

He cast off the rope and the current caught us. I wanted to close my eyes, but I couldn't. It seemed the rocks were rushing right towards us. Then suddenly the raft turned and they went whizzing by along side as the spray from the rapids washed over us. Soon we were very wet, but still we went down the river turning this way and that to avoid the dangers. Sometimes he yelled above the roar of the rapids "Paddle" and I paddled as if my life depended on it (which I think it did). We made it around every obstacle, fallen trees, and rocks.

Finally the river widened and became gentle. We could easily paddle across to the other side.

"We made it!" I exclaimed.

"Did you really think we wouldn't?" was all he said.

My faith and trust in him really grew after that experience.

We docked the raft and soon found the trail which left the river and started up.

"What's next?" I asked.

"It is time for you to learn to climb rocks."

"It's too hard," I whined, "Besides, I thought we didn't take that trail."

"True, this is a different trail, but you must learn all the lessons of the mountain. The order depends somewhat on you and how much you suffer learning the lessons definitely depends on you. When I lead you through, I will help you and it will not be as difficult. I will be there to comfort and encourage you. But as you have found out when you go against my will, you will suffer a lot more."

So saying, he headed up the trail to the rock climb. I followed directly after him. I determined that I wasn't going to go against his wishes again.

The trail was steep and it was hard. I got very tired. He climbed ahead and if I just couldn't make it, he would throw down a rope and pull me up. But eventually, we both made it to the top of the cliff.

"I'm proud of you," he said, "You did really well for your first time."

The smile of approval on his face made me feel so good in spite of my tiredness.

Then the second part of what he said hit me.

"First time? You mean there will be others?" I asked.

"Of course," he replied.

Well if I lived through this, I guess I could live through another climb if he was there to help.

We rested there for a long time, lying watching the clouds blow across the blue sky trying to guess what they looked like. I felt really great. It was so good to know I had done something to please my companion instead of always having him to get me out of a mess I'd gotten myself into.

But eventually he stood up and taking my hand said "It's time to go."

So we started off again on the trail. Soon we came to a place where I could see a picture perfect lake in the distance. I had so wanted to see a mountain lake and drink from the cold, clear water. I just knew this one was the one I had to see.

"Can't we just take a little detour and go past the lake and hook back up to this trail later?" I questioned.

"There will be other lakes," he replied.

"But I want to see this lake. I don't want to wait for other lakes. They won't be nearly as nice and I know it. I want to see a lake now!" I insisted.

I don't know what over came me, but the next thing I knew, I was off the trail headed to the lake. I reached the lake and sat on a large rock that jutted out into the deep blue water. It was as beautiful as I'd anticipated. But after I sat there for awhile, I started getting bored and restless. Now what could I do? I couldn't stay there forever. I couldn't go back and I had no clue as to where the next trail was.

I looked around. My companion was no where in sight.

I sighed a deep sigh and said out loud to myself, "Well I did it now. I've hurt him again and now I'm on my own. Serves me right. Why haven't I learned my lesson by now. I'll never learn. I'm just too pig-headed, stubborn and stupid!"

"Really!"

I spun around and there he was standing right behind me. "That bad," he said with a smile.

"It's not funny," I pouted, sticking out my lower lip in self-pity. He could no longer contain himself and burst out laughing. Soon I joined in.

Finally I said to him "I've done it again."

"Yes, I can see," he replied.

"Well what now. I guess you're getting pretty good at rescuing me and finding new trails," I said.

"I've been doing it for years. It's my job."

He sat down on the rock next to me to explain what we would do next. "Because of your choice, it has become necessary to teach you to swim now. I would have preferred to wait until summer when the water was a little warmer. But it must be done now even though it is early spring with the fresh melted snow feeding the lake. We must cross the lake and we must swim to cross it."

I shivered already just thinking about it. I hated being cold and wet. But I knew it was fruitless to argue and it had to be done.

Our first swimming lesson started right away. I didn't do too badly other than turning blue. I thought I would never get warm again. But he had a dry blanket and a warm fire after wards.

Eventually I did learn to swim - sort of. At least I could do a good dog paddle and stay afloat.

"It's time," he said.

"Are you sure? It's an awfully wide lake."

"It won't get any smaller," he replied.

"Ok," I responded reluctantly.

He dove in first. "Come on in the water's fine."

"Surely he must be joking," I thought and as soon as my foot touched the icy water my suspicions were confirmed.

He was laughing at me and my sour expression so I started splashing him and he was splashing me and I was in the water and we were both laughing and having a great time.

Finally he said, "Are we going to stay here all day slowly turning to ice cubes or are we going to cross the lake?"

So we started across. He could have easily out distanced me, but he stayed by my side the whole time encouraging me saying "You can do it," when I got tired.

We were almost across when I just couldn't go any more. My arms were like lead weights and refuse to move. "I'm not going to make it," I gasped as I started to go under.

But his strong arms were there holding me up and he carried me to shore and safety. Soon he had a fire going. How he produced warm dry blankets, I don't know. I had given up trying to figure

him out. I just knew he wasn't a regular person.

He sat down next to me with his arm around my shoulder. I could feel the warmth from the fire and from his body. Strength was returning slowly.

"Child," he asked very gently, "have you now learned your lesson?"

"I hope so," I said. I turned my head to look at his face more closely. "Who are you really? You are more than just a companion and guide."

He turned to me and took both of my hands in his and looking straight into my eyes said, "You know who I am."

"Yes, Lord," I said, dropping my eyes and leaning against him as he took me in his arms. The damn burst inside and I started weeping. I wept for joy and I wept for pain. I wept until I could weep no more.

From that day on I knew that my companion and guide not only knew the mountain, but he was the One who had made the mountain. I could trust Him to take care of me. I knew His way was best. I would like to say I always obeyed after that, but sometimes my stubbornness and self-will re-exerted itself or I just got distracted and left the trail inadvertently. But if I did, I was quick to call for help. He was always there for me. I have learned many things and have had occasion to use what I learned over and over. Sometimes we even come across other travelers and I get to share with them what I have learned and help them on their way.

I still haven't reached the top of the mountain, but I know I will someday because no matter how badly I stray from the path we are on, he is able to get me back on a path that still leads to the top.

Scriptures for discussion:

Romans 5:20

Romans 8:23

Philippians 1:8

Isaiah 58:6,7

Joel 2:25