

The Mountaineer

Have you decided to enlist in the adventure of being a Christian? Have you come to God for needed supplies and direction? But sometimes has the way been hard and you wanted to go back? Or perhaps you looked at someone else's life and their path or "mountain". It seemed easier to you and you wanted to climb their mountain instead of yours.

Once upon a time there was a man who wanted to be a mountaineer. He had seen mountains from a distance. They appeared to be so awesome in beauty and grandeur that he decided he would like to learn for himself how to climb so he could enjoy for himself their splendor and dazzling heights.

He found the best mountain climbing school in the country and went up to the desk.

"I'm here to learn how to climb mountains," he said.

"Fine," the man at the desk replied. "You have come to the right place. We are the most experienced and have the highest standards of training of any school in the area. Fill out these papers and sign here, and we will get you started. We've got to give you the proper gear and instructions before we send you off."

The new mountaineer was so excited he could hardly wait. The man at the desk went into the back room and came back with an armload full of clothes and equipment. Setting it down on the floor with a thud, he stood up and said, "There, this should do it to start with."

"Here are your boots, the most important part of your gear. Because if you have problems with your boots and feet, you may as well give it up. Take good care of your boots and your feet. There are your instructions on how to do this. Be sure to keep your feet dry. There are several changes of socks for this.

"Here are some changes of clothing. Weather is very unpredictable in the mountains and changes quickly. So there are lightweight shorts and shirts as well as heavy wool pants, sweaters, and a parka. Also, here is a rain poncho because it often rains in the afternoons.

"All of this fits in your pack, as well as your food and your cooking utensils. Pack it in like this," and he proceeded to show the new mountaineer how to properly pack his backpack.

"Rolled on the outside is your down sleeping bag to keep you warm at night

and a pad to protect you from moisture from the ground.

"In this pouch is your compass, map, knife, and flashlight. Never, never lose these. Your life depends on them.

"Also in this same pouch is some high energy snack food called gorp which you will need when the trail is rugged and you cannot fix a regular meal.

"Here is your canteen. Keep it filled with water always because you never know how long it will be until you come to another stream.

"We only will give you enough supplies now that you can easily carry. We have camps set up along the way where you can get more food and supplies as needed.

"You will not be completely alone in your journey. There are many in our program who are now accomplished mountaineers and they will often come back down after a difficult climb to help you with what they have just been through. Also, there will be others whose route is the same as yours for a way and you will have companionship and help should the trail become too rough. However, be careful in traveling with others and constantly check your own route on your map. Each person's route on their map is planned a little differently. We have mapped out each person's route to the top according to the way that they would learn the most. So if their way goes off from yours, let them go. Do not try to get them to follow your route and do not try to follow theirs or you will both end up in trouble.

"One more thing. Even when you are alone, you are not really alone. Here, keep this around your neck. It is an emergency signaling, homing device. If you get into a situation you just are unable to cope with, push this button and we will send out a helicopter to assist as needed."

And so with all his new gear on his back and information in his head, he set off to conquer the mountain. He was in high spirits as he set off. It was a beautiful day, the sky was clear bright blue as only a mountain sky can be. The dark green fir and pine trees were contrasted against the sky. The leaves of the poplars were bright green rustling in the breeze. The sweet smell of Ponderosa pine was in the air. He felt the gentle warmth of the golden sun on his skin. "Yes, I'm really going to enjoy this," he thought to himself as he walked.

He was soon joined by several others and after comparing maps, saw they would all be traveling together for awhile. So they continued on together. They were having such a lively conversation, it was noontime before they realized it.

They stopped to eat and then continued on. The trail had begun to pick up, but was still quite easy. Soon after lunch, the clouds rolled in, big white and gray thunderheads. The mountaineers scrambled to get out their

ponchos just in time before the rain came. It came down in sheets and then let up. After awhile, the sun came out and the raindrops sparkled on each blade of grass. It was a beautiful sight and the rain refreshing as it had begun to get quite warm and the trail dusty.

They made camp together that night, but in the morning, discovered that they each had different trails to take so they had to go separate ways.

The mountaineer's trail took a sudden turn and then went up and up with many switchbacks. "It looks pretty steep," he thought. "But I think I can make it." It looked like when he reached the top he would be on top of the mountain. He was excited. "This won't be so hard," he said to himself as he started to hike. Up and up, slower and slower he went. His pack got heavier and heavier and his mouth drier and drier, the canteen lighter and lighter. A couple of times he had to stop and had some fleeting thoughts that maybe this wasn't for him. But he was high enough now to see out over valleys below and to see mountains beyond. He knew he could never be content to stay at the base of the mountains again. So he went on, slowly putting one foot in front of the other, muscles feeling like jelly. Finally about evening, he reached the top. It was a nice level place but it wasn't the top. There looming over him a ways off, was the peak. This was only one of the foothills, a smaller mountain at the base of the larger, taller mountain. At first, he felt disappointed. But then realizing he had to climb these smaller mountains before he could get to the big one anyway, looked back down the trail and allowed himself to be encouraged by what he had accomplished that day. Maybe after he rested awhile, he could renew his strength and then be ready to press on.

As he looked across the plateau, he saw a tent set up. It was a supply depot just when he needed it. He was glad he had chosen the right school. He went up to the tent thoroughly exhausted. The man there helped him off with his pack and served him a wonderful hot meal. That night he slept very well and was much refreshed in the morning, all ready to continue his trek.

The next morning, he was greeted by a young man who said, "I have just been over the next part and I've come to help you. We'll need some equipment which you have not yet received, but is in our supply depot here. We will need ropes and technical climbing gear for we are going to have to go straight up the face of a rock cliff."

"Oh, no!" the mountaineer replied. "I hope it's safe."

"It is if you carefully do exactly what I tell you to, but if you don't.. Well, I'm not responsible for what might happen."

"OK," said the mountaineer, and off they went.

It was a grueling day. Lunch was taken on a narrow ledge overhanging a beautiful valley. The view was breathtaking. At one point, they stopped to watch the eagles soaring over the valleys below on the wind currents.

The mountaineer felt after a day like this, surely they must be near the top, but as they reached the top of the cliff that evening, the peak was still there in the distance and did not seem much closer at all.

In the morning, his guide and helper left him to go back to help others up the cliff. The mountaineer checked his map. It led up and across an old rock slide area covered with shale and loose gravel. It was a very frustrating day because for every two steps forward, it seemed he slid one backwards. He also was alone and missed the companionship of his fellow travelers.

The thoughts started coming again only a little stronger today. "Maybe this isn't for me," he said to himself, especially when the wind picked up in the afternoon and turned cold. Then the rain came and there was no place to get out of the storm. The rain blew in on the sides of his poncho. He was getting cold, wet, and miserable. It would be so easy just to slide down and forget it all.

Just then, he looked across the valley and saw another mountain. It was beautiful, covered with green tundra. It has such a gentle slope leading up the top. Surely it would be much easier to climb. He would go back and ask to climb that mountain instead. "But I'm so close to the top of this rock slide now, I may as well climb to the top and see what I can see from here. Maybe I'm getting close to the peak after all," he said to himself.

As he reached the top, he could still see the peak in the distance, but he could also see the camp set up right before him. "Boy, did I need this!" he thought. There was a fire to warm him, dry clothes to put on, and a hot meal.

After he had eaten and before retiring for the night, the man at this camp had some instructions for him. "One of your worst dangers from now on will be hypothermia; that is losing body heat faster than you can make it. To guard against that, you must keep dry and keep your head and feet warm, especially your head, because you lose so much heat from the head. To keep up your body's ability to make heat, you will need to eat almost constantly at times. So use your supply of gorp to snack on between meals. If you follow these instructions, you should be OK."

The mountaineer, by now feeling much better, had decided to continue, but he remembered the beautiful mountain with the nice easy slope to the top and asked about it. "I saw a very lovely mountain today. Why couldn't I be assigned to climb it instead of this one which is so hard and takes so long? I think I could climb that one in only a few days."

"Aha!" the man replied with a chuckle. "You have not been the only one to see it and have such thoughts; almost every climber does. We do not often assign it for two reasons: first, the mountain you have been assigned is excellent for training purposes because it has some of all kinds of terrain so that once you have learned to climb this mountain, you can climb any mountain. The second reason is that that mountain is deceptive. You see only the top of

the mountain for the hills in front hide the true nature of its base. It is impossible to get to the side of the mountain you saw from the base because it is a sheer rock face extending up hundreds of feet to the smooth easy slope in front. The only trail up the mountain is on the back side which is very jagged, rocky and harder than what you will experience on this mountain."

"Oh, well," said the mountaineer. "I guess I won't be tempted to try that one. At least not yet."

"You are wise," said the man. "Others who gave up on this mountain tried to climb that one only to fail again. They began looking for an easier mountain and failed again. They still haven't climbed one mountain and haven't learned how to really climb, for they give up when the trail leads them into difficulties."

The next day on the trail, the mountaineer met several people coming back down the mountain. Some walked with a strong, firm stride, heads held high, eyes glowing. "I made it," they said. "It wasn't so bad."

This gave the mountaineer encouragement. If they did it, he could do it too.

But then, there were the others who came with stumbling feet and downcast eyes. "No one can climb that peak," was their reply. "It's just asking too much. I can't do it."

Some of them said they would not try again, but spend the rest of their lives in the valleys. Others had seen the beautiful easy-looking mountain across the valley and had decided to try it instead. The mountaineer tried to explain to them that it was not as it seemed, but they would not believe him.

And so the days went on. Sometimes the trail was not too hard and it was sunny. Other days, it was stormy and he had to take shelter in a cave or rock outcrop most of the day so made little progress. Then some days, there were large crevices to cross and cliffs to be scaled. Sometimes he had companions. Sometimes he was alone. There were times in desperation when he used his radio and the helicopter came to help.

But one day, he was using his rope to climb a very steep part of the trail. He felt his strength gone. He could hold on no longer. He called on his radio, but no help came. "Now what?" he thought. Then he remembered that the purpose of this training was to help him get stronger. They did not want him to fail. "I don't think I can go on," he said to himself. "But maybe they think I can. So I will trust their judgment." He rested awhile, ate a candy bar, and then made himself go on. He made it to the top of the cliff where he was greeted by - the helicopter!

"Where were you when I needed you?" he exclaimed!

"You didn't really need us. See, here you are. You made it and now you know you can do more than you thought you could before."

As the days wore on, he had to make himself look at the beauty around him. The temptation was to keep looking at his feet, one foot in front of the other, again and again. The monotony and drudgery would wear him down, but when he looked up, up at the sky, crisp and blue, the white clouds like cotton puffs, the tall trees reaching to the sky and hear the birds chirping, then he would breathe deeply and be refreshed.

He was becoming an experienced, seasoned mountaineer and hadn't really realized it. Each day there were new challenges, new situations, some exciting and some just plain hard and tiring. He learned to look at the sky for encouragement, to look up. The peak still seemed distant, but getting much closer each day. He had become accustomed to this life. He was still tempted occasionally to quit, but never took these thoughts seriously any more. "Why should I quit?" he said to himself. "I'm closer than I ever have been before and besides, I've grown to like the struggle and hard parts and I definitely enjoy the sights on the way."

Then one day he stepped out of the forest onto the tundra. He had come to the tree line, the altitude above which no trees can grow. The wind became bitter and howled in his ears. He pulled his cap on tightly and buttoned up his parka. This was it. He was very close to the top now. If he could just keep going, he would make it.

He checked his shoes, two pair of socks for warmth and protection, took a drink of water, ate a candy bar, and said to himself, "Let's go for it." He grabbed a stick to help lean on on the very steep places. At times, he needed the ropes and pinions but he kept on going, up and up, higher and higher. Some of the clouds were now below him. Still he climbed. He heard the eagles screaming as they soared around him on the currents. The wind whipped him. The afternoon rain stung his face like needles, but in his heart was a fierce determination. "I will never give up now, not until I have conquered this mountain and climbed it to the very top."

And so he proceeded one hand-hold to another, one foot step to another, one ridge to another, always hoping that this one is the last one, yet always there seemed to be one more, just one more.

He was tiring. His heart was strong, but his body was quickly wearing down. He would have quit had he not remembered the day he called for the helicopter that did not come. He knew he could do more even when he felt like he couldn't.

It was getting near sunset when he climbed to the top of a ridge expecting to see yet another before him. But as he stepped up and looked around, he realized he was there--at the very top of the peak. There were no other ridges. He stood up as tall as he could and surveyed the scene before him,

mountains and valleys all around him, at his feet. He could see back the way he had come--all the ridges, all the cliffs, all the hills and valleys. He had conquered them all. Up here on the mountain top, he was the king and all this was his domain.'

The sun was starting to set, casting its golden-red rays across the valleys partially hidden in darkness now and setting the mountain peaks around about on fire as they reflected the light. He had never dreamed of such splendors of colors, gold, yellow, pinks, reds, purples, and blues. It was more magnificent than he had imagined it would be. He asked himself, "Was it worth it?" and answered a resounding, "Yes!" He yelled, he shouted. In spite of his exhaustion, he ran and leaped and danced.

Finally, his excitement spent, he made camp for the night. He enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and a gorgeous sunrise. He was somewhat reluctant to leave, but already he had seen distant mountains that challenged him. He was already anticipating the joy of seeing the world from their summits. He had become a mountaineer.

Scriptures for discussion:

Romans 5:3-5

Hebrews 10:35-39

Philippians 4:19

Hebrews 12:1-77

II Timothy 2:3