

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Have you ever been in a situation where you could not go back and the way ahead seemed blocked? You looked for a way out and found none. Perhaps you even contemplated taking your own life as an escape to an intolerable situation. Or maybe you just felt like giving up and sinking into a deep depression, withdrawing from life.

One early spring, I was camping in the mountains in Colorado. I preferred early spring as there were few other campers and the trails were nearly deserted. The mountains were more like I imagined them to be a century ago. Wildlife could be seen and one could walk for miles without encountering another human being.

The streams usually trickling rivulets in the summer were now swollen with the melting snow which could still be seen in patches everywhere. Green leaflets were popping out from the aspen and mountain maple trees. Spears of grass and shoots which would later be the blue bells, Indian paintbrushes and other flowers were just emerging from the ground. It was a perfect day for a hike.

As I started up the trail, birds were singing overhead and two gray jays who had been hanging around the camp begging for crumbs accompanied me, flying from tree to tree, scolding me to go faster. I breathed deeply of the fresh mountain air and felt exhilarated. This was life. How good to be alive.

I walked along enjoying the pines and the clumps of aspens, their almost white trunks and new, bright green new leaves. Occasionally, I would pass a small stream tumbling down the mountainside and I would pause to look into its depths or just listen to its music. The morning was wearing on, but I was so preoccupied I didn't even notice it.

As I walked, the trail was leading up and up, but I had planned on turning around soon and the way back would be much easier and therefore, faster. So I wasn't too concerned about the time, even though it was close to noon. I felt I could keep on for awhile and have a late lunch when I returned. I hadn't taken food or water with me because I had planned on only taking a short hike.

Rather suddenly, the trees thinned and the trail led around the side of a rather steep slope. I wanted to see what was just around the bend so I thought, "I'll just follow this for a little while and then I'll turn back." There was almost a sheer drop-off over the edge of the trail and the side near the mountain almost went straight up as well, but the view of the valley below and the mountains across the valley was spectacular. I had never seen anything quite so breathtaking. It was so thrilling, I just had to keep on to see more. It would be worth it to miss my lunch for this. The very tops of the mountains still had their mantle of snow and the dark pines looking black against the white made a sharp contrast with the crystal blue sky. I couldn't stop now.

So I continued until I heard a low rumble. I looked back and saw rocks tumbling down the mountainside above and slightly behind me. I ran as fast as I could and crouched down behind a rock outcropping, hoping to escape being hit by the flying rocks and stones. (I had forgotten one of the dangers of early spring--avalanches caused by snow and ice melting and releasing the rocks that have broken during the winter. As they start to roll down the mountainside, they start others rolling, picking

up more rocks and trees and debris and destroying anything in their path.)

Soon all was quiet again. I picked my way carefully out of my shelter and looked back down the trail only there was no trail, only a gap where it had been. The avalanche had sheared off that section of the trail leaving no way back.

Well, I was now committed to going forward hoping that eventually, I would come across a trail, a person, or both who could lead me back to civilization. Up to now, I had been able to ignore the rumblings of my stomach, but now I noticed it and with all the activity, had built up quite an appetite. But--I had no food and I was also thirsty. I had planned that in an emergency I could drink from a mountain brook, but out here on the side of this mountain with a straight-down drop-off and a sheer cliff up, there were no rivulets to drink from. I had no choice but to go on. What was once fun had now become drudgery. I no longer enjoyed the view. Something had changed, the mountains no longer seemed to be my friends welcoming me, but a sinister force trying to trap me.

I continued on and on, growing more weary as well as hungry and thirsty. This was my first hike of the season and I was not yet in condition. My muscles were aching already. I kept telling myself "just a little bit more. The trail has to lead down eventually." But it just kept on and on around the side of the mountain.

I felt a chill in the air and saw storm clouds gathering. Already across the valley the tallest peaks were shrouded and no longer visible. My heart sank. I also knew there was another danger in early spring hiking--late spring snowstorms which can come up suddenly, catching a hiker off guard. It looked like I was in for snow and I had only a thin, lightweight jacket. I quickened my steps. Hopefully, something would change soon.

It was when I came around the next bend that I heard it--the roar of a waterfall. At first, I didn't know if that was good or bad. Perhaps I could get some water and besides, I had no choice but to continue. As I got closer, the noise was louder and louder. Occasionally, if the trail went in just the right direction, I could see a glimpse of silver coming down the mountainside directly ahead. It looked like the trail went directly up to it. I continued, hoping there would be a bridge or a way to cross below the falls. And as I came around the final curve and was able to see the falls and trail in plain view, it was evident there was no bridge or place to cross. The trail led right to the falls and stopped. If there had been a bridge, it must have been washed out by the falls, swollen with so much extra water from the melting snow.

Now what would I do? I sat down on a rock to contemplate my choices. I couldn't go back. I couldn't go up. I couldn't go down--and live, that is. I couldn't go forward. I could stay where I was and starve or freeze to death. A cold gust of wind blew through my jacket and I shivered. I could just step over the edge and that would be the end, no more suffering.

I was peering over the edge contemplating that move when the thought came to me. "Why don't you go all the way to the falls? At least you could get a drink and maybe you could find a way to get past them."

"Yes," I said to myself, "Good idea."

So from the verge of despair came a ray of hope. I stood up, my muscles already stiffening from the cold. By now, the sun was behind the clouds and a few snow flurries were beginning to fall. I walked-

-almost ran--as fast as I could toward the falls. It still looked as if the trail ended there, but I continued on anyway.

Finally, I was there. But to my surprise, instead of ending, the trail turned in toward the mountain and went behind the falls. I followed it in amazement and wonder and also with a great sense of relief. "What if I had given up in despair back there on the trail?" I asked myself. Behind the falls, the trail was damp and slippery and spray from the falls wet my face as I slowly made my way through. Once clear of the falls, I could see the trail continuing on the other side and starting to descend down the mountainside. Hope again was rekindled and I quickened my steps. By now, it was really starting to snow and to accumulate on the ground. It was also starting to get darker as the afternoon turned into evening. On and on, down and down, quicker and quicker, around one bend and then another, until there below-- I saw the most wonderful, beautiful sight--lights. It was the campground. I had hiked all the way around the mountain.

It snowed that night and the winds blew, but I was snug and warm in my sleeping bag and tent. I was very thankful that I had kept on going and not given in to seemingly impossible circumstances.

Scriptures for Discussion:

James 1:12 - Perseverance
I Corinthians 10:13 - Way of escape
Jeremiah 29:11 - Future and hope
Psalms 34:19 - Deliverance from troubles
Hebrews 10:35-39 - Endurance