

DISCIPLESHIP

Climbing Black Mountain

Discussion

A couple of months ago I had the opportunity to climb my first mountain and reach my first summit. A friend of mine talked me into climbing Black Mountain. It was my first ascent up a steep incline, and it was more of an extreme hiking experience than climbing a sheer face. It provided great insight into my Christian walk.

The "climb" consisted of hiking up a steep and very narrow trail composed of loose rock, dirt, sometimes mud, and often a path divided by a large crevice; all of which dictated that you had to be careful where you placed each foot as you made the ascent. We wound around and up the side of the mountain, essentially following a trail which was probably created by water running down the mountain over years of rain and other weather. The result was a twisting ever-steeper path which eventually led to the summit of the mountain, and it provided vistas that you could never experience by staying below on level ground.

My friend proved to be an able guide, pointing out areas where footing was difficult, and stopping whenever he noted the need for me to catch my breath and get my bearings. I was pleasantly surprised by my ability to actually make the climb; and, at the same time, I readily observed many life lessons as we worked our way up to the summit.

I discovered that looking up at the summit as we were climbing kept me focused on the climb, but often caused me to lose sight of the path and my footing. I soon realized I could not safely make the climb with my attention focused on anything else but the path that we were following. As we got higher and higher, the view got more and more spectacular. Again, I had to stop myself from looking at the panoramic view, and re-focus on the path or I would again lose my footing.

Approaching the summit I found myself exhilarated by the sensation of being closer and closer to achieving my goal of making a successful climb. But then my friend pointed out to me that in mountain climbing, reaching the summit is only half the journey — you also have to make a successful descent.

Arriving at the summit was, all that I had imagined it would be. A feeling of accomplishment overwhelmed me, along with a sense of awe as I viewed all that God had made when He created the earth. How beautiful it was to see it from a mile above of the surface!

After spending only a few minutes at the top, we began our descent from the summit. It proved equally challenging, and perhaps more so, compared to the climb up the mountain; and it quickly became quite obvious that if I wasn't as careful going down as I was going up, things could get dangerous. I needed to control my rate of descent or risk falling off the trail, and again I also needed to keep focused on the placement of my feet with each step. For both the climb as well as the descent, paying attention to the trail beneath my feet and the path immediately ahead were paramount, if I was to be successful and complete the journey without injury.

Having successfully completed the climb, here is what I learned from the experience:

1. All of the fitness exercises and climb-readiness activities that I had participated in before the climb were essential to me being physically capable of completing the climb;
2. A guide is indispensable for your first climb. Without my friend to guide me, I would have easily become injured or gotten lost. His guidance, reassurances, and knowledge of the landscape and potential hazards made the trip not only possible, but successful;

3. To climb any challenging mountain successfully, you need to stay focused on the path and watch your footing carefully;
4. The experience of making the climb was as meaningful as reaching the summit itself, especially since the amount of time actually spent on the summit was a very small percentage of the time spent in the overall journey; and finally
5. If you don't take that first step up the mountain, you will never reach the summit.

Several parallels for our Christian walk are applicable. Christ, through the Holy Spirit is our guide. He knows the trail that we need to follow; he knows the training we need; and he knows how to guide us there successfully. However, we must have the faith to take the first step; and then, we must be disciplined enough to stick to the trail he leads us on. For us as Christians, God has also provided a mountain-climbing guide book — His Holy Word — with which he prepares us for the journey.

The Psalmist tells us, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path." It was only when I focused on the path and the placement of my feet that I was able to continue the climb and succeed in the endeavor. The same is true in our Christian walk, namely, that we must always be mindful of the path that God has planned out for us, and we must keep our feet on the path. These are key to living the successful Christian life. Paul commanded us to "keep your feet shod with the...Gospel" (Eph. 6:15); this is the only true way that we can stay on the right path. Christ also teaches us how narrow the path is for us and how difficult it is to find: "But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Matt. 7:14)

Reaching the summit in our Christian walk requires our complete attention to God's leading and His Word. It will be challenging, and at times seem almost impossible. Yet, in several places, the Bible tells us that by enduring the trials of this world, sticking to the path no matter how narrow or steep, and reaching the summit, we will receive "the crown of life".

For the Christian, reaching the summit is really only the beginning. From there, we will spend eternity in a "new heaven and a new earth"; and "God shall wipe away all tears from their [our] eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away." (Rev. 21:4)

However, we need to take that first step, placing all of our faith and trust solely in Him. Once we do, He will illuminate our path and be with us every step of the way — but we need to keep to the path. Following Christ is not easy, but it is worth every step that we take. I pray today that you will commit to following Him. He stands ready to lead each of us; He has a plan specifically for you and specifically for me. While the climb may seem uncertain at times, rest assured that He is right there with us. Keep climbing; the summit awaits! Be faithful in following Him, and He will be faithful in getting you there.

May God watch over you as you make your climb, and may all of us be found faithful. When we reach the summit, may God say to each of us "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matt. 25:23)

In Christ,

Wes