

CLIMBING UP THE MOUNTAIN

A Devotional Meditation from 2 Kings 4:8-37, Mark 8:14-29, and John 11:17-27

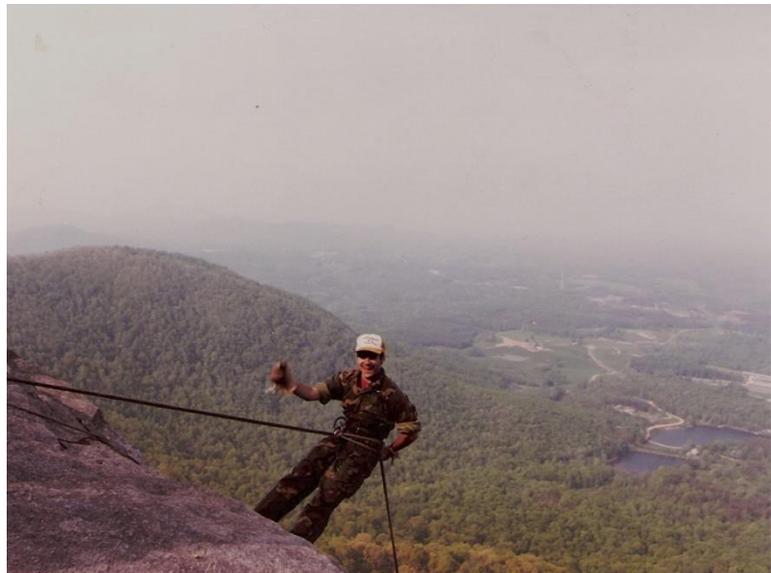
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In my family photo archive, there is a picture of me hanging off the side of a mountain, suspended by a slender rope. The occasion was a training expedition to Yonah Mountain, Georgia, in the spring of 1980, with the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps at Florida State University. We had travelled to Yonah Mountain to get a small taste of what the Army Rangers experience in the Mountain Phase of their rigorous qualification course.

It was an exciting prospect for us young cadets, but that excitement quickly faded into something approaching terror when the moment came to step off into empty space. That's the moment my photograph captures, although one wouldn't know it from looking at the

smiling face of the 19-year-old standing on the granite rock overhang. That was the last firm foothold before stepping off into the air. My feet wouldn't touch solid ground again until I had completed the long descent to the assembly point where my fellow cadets and our instructors waited. They had already completed their rappels and, having passed the test, eagerly cheered on each of us yet to cross over into that blessed place reserved for Yonah Mountain veterans. My ears didn't register their voices, loud



as they were. Neither did I take in the stunning view of North Georgia's green countryside extending below me all the way to the horizon. All that filled my consciousness was that next step – a step that would leave my life quite literally hanging by a rope. If the rope parted, or if I lost control of my descent, or if the belay man holding the end of the rope down below could not catch me, then my young life might end there on those granite slopes.

And then I took the step. . .

and much too soon, my feet were back on solid ground.

The moment of terror passed, and in its place came exhilaration, peace, joy, all the emotions of one who has faced and survived mortal peril. Before I could even think about what had happened, I had joined my fellow Yonah veterans in vigorous encouragement of those still on top of the mountain.

That wasn't the first great test of courage I had faced, but it was the most serious in terms of potential outcomes. Yes, I could have died or been seriously injured that day,

but there is a worse outcome: I could have failed the test and never stepped off that granite outcropping. The ridicule from my fellow cadets would have paled in comparison to the shame I would carry with me, and along with it the enduring torture of wondering what if –

What if I had mustered only a little more courage?

What if I had trusted my instructors just a little more?

What if I had believed more in myself?

What if I had trusted more in the God I said I believed to hold my life in His hands?

That's what it really comes down to for those of us who claim allegiance to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If we believe Him, then no peril or threat can stop us.

And that's where the difficulty lies. "Believe" means more than simply intellectual acknowledgment. True belief comes from experience, and experience comes from living through those perilous situations that come inevitably to us. It could be as simple as tending a sick child, or as harrowing as braving a flooded stream to escape to higher ground, or even as terrifying as entering a combat zone. Then again, it could be something more difficult, such as resolutely enduring a lifetime of debilitating illness. How does one muster courage to face a new day when there is less strength in the body than the day before? What if the pain comes back with renewed vigor? What if there is no cure, and little hope of easing the suffering? That's a test I have never faced, but I know those who do face it, and I am awed by their ability to carry on.

How do they do it? The same way any of us endure any trial: we learn to trust our God to supply all we need at the moment it is needed. And again, that trust comes through experience. Many accounts in the scriptures explain how God's people gained that experience, or walked away from it. The Israelite woman from the town of Shunem gained that experience when she kindly opened her home to the prophet Elisha. In return, he prayed that she might have a son, and soon the miracle child brought joy to her and her elderly husband. But one day the boy died, and his distraught mother immediately sought out the man of God. Why? Because she knew from experience that he knew how to access the power of the living God to preserve and restore life. That's why she clung desperately to Elisha, crying out, "As *ADONAI* lives and as you live, I won't leave you." (2 Kings 4:30) Again, her faith was rewarded when God granted another miracle to bring life back to her son.

The Shunammite woman didn't waiver in her faith, but others teetered on the edge, such as the father of a demon-possessed boy when Yeshua's disciples had trouble driving out the evil spirit. It took the direct intervention of the Messiah to bring deliverance, but even then the matter remained in doubt when the father said, "But if You can do anything, have compassion and help us!"

"If You can't?" *Yeshua* said to him. "All things are possible for one who believes!" Immediately the boy's father cried out, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:22-24 TLV)

At that moment, the desperate father moved from unbelief to faith. The crisis demanded it of him. Yes, often we need God's help to strengthen our belief, but He moves

only in willing and open hearts, such as we see in Martha, sister of Lazarus. As the scripture says, she found it hard to believe after her brother had died:

Martha said to *Yeshua*, "Master, if You had been here, my brother wouldn't have died! But I know, even now, that whatever You may ask of God, He will give You."

Yeshua said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha said to Him, "I know, he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Yeshua said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life! Whoever believes in Me, even if he dies, shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

She says to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, *Ben-Elohim* who has come into the world." (John 11:21-27 TLV)

Martha's crisis of faith is our own crisis. It is easy to have faith in the past, as in, "If you had been here before my brother died, you could have healed him." It is also easy to have a future faith, as in, "I know he will rise again on the last day." But we do not live in the past, nor in the future. We live in the *right now*. Where is the power of God to help in this very moment? That is what Martha yearned to know, and what *Yeshua* yearned for her to know.

That she wanted to believe is clear in her desperate, but perhaps bitter words, "I know, even now, that whatever You may ask of God, He will give You." That He wanted her to learn this is clear from His answer:

"I am the resurrection and the life! Whoever believes in Me, even if he dies, shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha passed the test. Her faith moved the Messiah to demonstrate the power of God even over death, and at His word, her brother returned from the grave. In that moment, Martha gained not only faith to believe, but revelation of the power of God standing right in front of her. Experience informed her faith, and revelation added to her faith the testimony that endured not only to the end of her life, but through the centuries to our very day.

This is the kind of faith born of hard experience. Yes, acquiring such faith is not only possible, but essential to walk out our Kingdom destiny. The question is whether we are willing to endure the trials required to access it. With such faith, we can not only climb mountains, but move them.