

Climbing Pike's Peak

Exodus 19:4

*You have seen all that I have done to the Egyptians,
and I took you up as upon eagles' wings, and I brought you near to myself.*

When I moved to Colorado Springs in 1998 to work at the National Office of the Christian and Missionary Alliance hiking looked like a good idea. Colorado Springs is about 6,500 feet above sea level, making it difficult for some people to breathe easily in the thin mountain air. For me the mountain air was great. I loved hiking and my first experience above 10,000 feet was euphoric. Above the Springs stands the majestic often snow-covered Pikes Peak.

The first time Andrew and I tried climbing Pikes Peak was just before Christmas, and there was a little snow but not much. We made it about half way up, to the Barr Camp, which had taken us about 3 1/2 hours of steady climbing. We both had small backpacks. My twenty-four year old son is a jock. I am not. I had a coronary "roto-rooter" job (angioplasty with two stents put in) just a year before. I was recovered but not in the best of shape. Andrew ended up carrying my pack for the last mile and a half - OK, maybe two miles.

When I got there I was so exhausted and breathing so heavily I thought I would never be able to climb back down that day. In fact, I said as much to Andrew as I collapsed in a chair. But after resting for an hour and taking in fluids and nourishment I felt somewhat revived. When I saw the very rustic overnight accommodations I decided to try going down. We made it down much more easily. I couldn't even get out of bed the next day and I ached for days.

A few months later in May I had become more accustomed to the altitude. I had been playing racquetball several times a week, so I was in better shape than when I arrived in Colorado Springs. Andrew, always being in top form, was ready to assault the summit the moment he arrived from graduate school in England. He was determined to make it to the top this time. I did not feel in top form so I told my wife, Marilyn, when I left her off at work at 6:30 a.m. that I was sure the best I could do was to get to the A-frame cabin at the tree line.

Andrew and I started our trek at 7:30 a.m. The weather was mild, overcast with the threat of sprinkles to dampen our walk but the temperature was in the low sixties. The first couple of miles of the trail are very steep as the path zigzags up the mountain gaining altitude rather quickly. That part of the trail takes about an hour and a half of fast paced, calf-cramping, lung-bursting, heart-pounding, blood-pressure-stressing, my-head-is-dizzy, wondering-why-I-am-doing-this, kind

of climb. Then we rested for 10 to 15 minutes, eating snacks and hydrating before continuing our upward climb.

The path leveled out and became a steady upward grade as we moved farther and farther from civilization. The views of the valleys and the plains below where Colorado Springs and our home lay were spectacular and so we were refreshed thinking, "This is why I love to punish myself to get up here."

For the next several miles it is uphill with woods surrounded with beautiful boulders in odd rock formations. It was beautiful scenery! Then it leveled out (that is figurative since it never is really level) into a meadow-like area with views of the peak. Finally, after hiking almost continuously for hours, except for stops to drink water, we arrived at the Barr Camp, the halfway point.

The Barr Camp is a rustic cabin where a family lives year-round to assist hikers on their way up Pikes Peak. The weather was now noticeably colder and clouds covered the peak. But there was no snow on the ground. We asked our host about the weather at the top. He radioed ahead and reported that there was sleet and snow in the forecast with wind. It was then that he cautioned us about even thinking about trying for the top. We mentioned that we wanted to keep climbing to at least get to the A-frame cabin at the tree line. His pessimistic report was that other climbers had not been able to get through. The snow was still far too deep. Reports had been coming in that it was still impassible even to the A-frame. They also said, "We don't recommend attempting the summit, at least not without the right equipment (snowshoes, etc) because there are six foot drifts up to the timberline and then snow to the top." We said, "Okay, but we'll just go a couple more miles until the snow gets too deep. We just want to see it." We signed in the guestbook and promised we would go up as far as we could and would check in on our return. We really intended to return.

So off we went. Soon we came across a guy with full equipment on his way down. He was a young guy maybe around thirty years old and built like an athlete. He had full gear: waterproof boots, trousers and jacket, cuffs around his ankles to keep the snow out, poles for balance, and snowshoes. He said, "Once you hit 10,000 feet it becomes a virtual impasse. I couldn't even get through with the snowshoes - I kept sinking into the six-foot snow and it exhausted me very quickly, so I gave up at around 11,000 ft. You can hike another mile and a half or so from here, but the summit is just not possible and it's still about 6 miles from here."

We were certain that we would never get very far, but we had already climbed to the Barr Camp once before so we wanted to at least get to the tree line (that is where vegetation stops growing, usually about 11,000 feet.) So on we trekked.

The path was pretty clear except for huge mounds of drifted snow that seemed to be only on the trail, not in the woods. The snow on the path was deep but firm from being there a long time and trampled by many footprints. We figured if there were all those footprints others must have gone this far. It couldn't be too bad. Soon we came to what appeared to be the end of the normal trail. The footprints were still in the snow, but they went in various directions. The well-equipped climber mentioned seeing those footprints too, but he was familiar with the trail and was certain they were not following the trail at that point. We later discovered he was right.

Being stout fellows and lovers of snow we plodded on traversing the deepest snow as the trail turned to the right and rose steeply uphill. When Andrew's legs went down into the snow up to his waist it became obvious that this was probably not the normal trail. We could see some fence wires along the streambed that we were following but no obvious trail. We climbed on, lumbering over soft places in the snow, often up to our knees and then sinking to our hips. From time to time we could hear a torrent of water gushing down beneath the snow. This was obviously a stream we were following, but it was a wide treeless gully so we followed on. At times it became so difficult to get past the deep soft snow that we climbed over to the rocks and jumped from rock to rock. We grabbed low hanging tree branch to tree branch until it was passable again. Then we returned to the soft snow of the streambed.

It was beautiful and we love snow. If we had a sled we would have had a really great time. In due course we came to an opening and could see the treeline above us. That spurred us on! At the treeline the view opened up so we could see the top of Pike's Peak. We could see laterally to the north and south of us too. Then looking back toward the plains we had a fabulous view of Colorado Springs far below us now. Wow! This view itself was worth the climb.

We looked around for the A-frame cabin but it was nowhere to be found. But there stood Pike's Peak right in front of us. We could still see footprints leading straight on up the gully to the top. We occasionally stopped on some large boulders for a snack of dried bananas, raisins and M&Ms. There the birds flew right up and grabbed nuts and raisins right out of our hands. This was a paradise!

As we surveyed our locale we decided to go up a little higher where we might be able to look back and see the A-frame we had missed. The higher we got the more beautiful it became. It was so quiet. You could understand why mountain men have chosen to live alone in the wonder of these rocks and woods.

By this time it was approaching 12:30 and we had to make a decision to go on or turn back. I was in favor of turning back, having not found the A-frame, and conscious of my tired legs and the long walk back down the trail. Andrew however, being young and energetic, and having come all the way from England with so very few chances to be this close to the summit, urged for going on to the top. "Look, Dad" he said, "It's right in front of us. It can't be that far!" I cautioned Andrew that distances could be deceiving at these altitudes, but not wanting to ruin his hike, and not wanting him to go on alone (which he would have done I am sure) I hesitantly agreed to press on for the summit. After all, we had all afternoon in front of us and certainly the worst was behind us. It did look rather close from where we were standing. (In fact it was about four miles of steep 45 to 60 degree grade to climb.) I suppose it appeared so close because there were no trees or objects by which to judge distance. Also, there were those pockmarks in the snow. We were sure they were footprints and we could see they went straight up the mountain toward the summit. So, "Dumb and Dumber" continued on.

Soon those footprints were no longer clear footprints. Maybe they never were. The altitude does strange things to your mind. Now they appeared to be just pockmarks in the snow, but we thought they were footprints. The more we climbed the less clear the footprints became. Our breathing was definitely more labored now. We were well above the treeline and ascending steeply. From time to time we would stop for a drink, rest and eat something. Not that we had any appetite. Mostly we just knew that we needed the food for energy to keep going.

Andrew led the way. He often would follow pockmarks that took him far to the left or right of the center line only to find the side trails were no easier. We had to jam our feet into the snow to get a foothold. I was thankful for Andrew's footprints ahead of me. It made my climb easier, except that his stride was bigger than mine. I couldn't always put my feet into his footprints. The slope was difficult enough to climb, but adding to our misery was the fact that the snow was crusted with ice making it difficult to take a firm step forward. We had to stomp with each step to get a foothold in the snow and keep from sliding backward.

In the thin air above 12,000 feet this kind of action saps your strength in a hurry. I found that at times I could only take one or two steps then stop, lean over, catch my breath then take a few more steps. The weather was getting worse. Instead of raindrops, snow flurries pelted us as we climbed. The wind began blowing gusty and strong. Now it was no longer wet snow but ice hard compact snow. The temperature was well below freezing now. It was getting very cold. I remembered hearing that the temperature on the mountain would drop below zero at night.

Our shoes and jeans were wet from climbing through so much wet snow. Neither of us had boots. Mine were a pair of hiking sneakers (not waterproof), and Andrew's were similar but high tops. We had worn just jeans, t-shirts, a long-sleeved shirt, and a jacket. I carried a hooded sweatshirt since I don't like the cold winds on the mountains blowing down my neck. Andrew had worn just a light windbreaker jacket over his shirt. I had left my down-filled jacket in the car thinking it was too warm for it, and we were certainly not going to the top.

Andrew was much colder than me. I was sweating profusely from the exertion of climbing. Andrew was getting quite cold. My first hint of trouble was when he complained about his feet being wet and cold. I had not even noticed my cold feet until he mentioned it. When we stopped to sit on a rock we noticed the wind had picked up and clouds were now building over us. Andrew was visibly shivering. In spite of the cold we were sweating from the exertion of climbing this monster mountain. I had put extra socks, double pairs, in my pack. So we sat on the rock and changed our socks. That helped immediately. Then we realized that if we put our shoes back on the socks would soon be as wet as the others. Digging into my trusty backpack we found some plastic grocery bags and put them around our dry socks before inserting our feet in our soaked shoes. That helped Andrew with his cold feet. I had taken thick ski gloves with me. Andrew had not.

We climbed on until 3 o'clock. We were beyond exhausted and we were getting concerned. We expected to catch the cog rail train down from the summit but we were not sure when the last one left. I was thinking it was 5:30 p.m. but was not sure, was it 4:30 or 5:30?

The more we climbed the farther the Peak seemed to be. It was getting closer but the climb was getting harder and noticeably steeper! We had not planned on this. We also thought that we would have crossed the regular trail and would be able to follow that more easily to the top, but no trail.

By 3:30 we were so exhausted and out of breath that we were getting sick. I got cramps and diarrhea along the trail. (Fortunately again I brought a roll of toilet paper and plastic bags to carry it out in.) Andrew had a splitting headache and nausea. Neither of us wanted to eat anything. Now we were worried! The steepest part of the climb was still ahead of us and it really did look impassable! There was deep snow and getting deeper with huge rocks ahead to climb over. I was at the point of panic.

I knew I could not make the rest of this climb without supernatural intervention. I began to cry out to God -- "O God, what have we done! Please send a helicopter, or someone to save us. We are in big trouble. We need help. We may

not get out of this alive. If we miss that train we may have to spend the night on top, and the temperature still drops below zero! O Lord, have mercy. O Lord hear and answer, please." Then I began to pray with each step. "O Lord, give us the wings of eagles."

By this time we could only go a few feet and stop to bend over to catch our breath. I hated this snow! Every step was a labor. These sneakers were not made for high mountain snow trekking.

Finally we could see the train in the distance. Certainly they could see us! But they couldn't. We were like tiny ants on the mountain side. I began to call out loud "Hello! Can anybody hear us! We need help!" Of course no one could hear us. They were on top and we were over a steep embankment from where they were. The snow now was so deep we gave up on it and went toward the steep rocks instead. Perhaps they would be easier to scale -- NOT! The rocks were steep, wet, and slippery. There was no other way to the top and it was too late in the day to start back down. So we pressed on.

By this time I was in front and Andrew was following. I was worried about him. He kept complaining about his headache, and that is not like Andrew. I knew he was suffering from altitude sickness but what else could we do but press on. I was also aware that if either of us fell there would be no stopping our fall, gravity and the wind would take us down the mountain.

About this time we caught a glimpse of the corner of the observation tower and a woman was standing there looking out over the mountains. I shouted more "hellos" but no one saw or heard us.

The path had gone almost vertical on us. Andrew was sure an angel kept him from falling backward and down onto rocks. At one point his head went fuzzy and light and his body leaned back and he would have fallen backward, but at that moment he felt as though a hand was placed on his back and instead of falling back he leaned forward. Later, when we reached the top he thanked me for pushing him against the rock when he was falling. I said, "Andrew, I was in front of you. I never pushed you against the rock."

We climbed over another section of boulders and we could see the roof of the summit house. The last few hundred yards we climbed almost straight up on our hands and knees. We climbed over the last steep boulders to the top and there directly in front of us was the train! What a welcome sight!

We staggered into the summit store to get warm and get tickets before the train left. While we were negotiating for one-way tickets down the announcement was made that the last train was leaving at 4:40. (It was 4:30 when we stepped over

the tracks) All those who came in cars would have to leave as the store was closing too. Andrew and I felt like crying. We had made it! Both of us had kept quiet about our desperate fears and silently called on the Lord to save us. He did. We will be forever grateful. There is no bragging about making it to the top.

When we boarded the train the conductor came around and saw our backpacks and drenched clothes. He asked where we had been. We told him we climbed Pike's Peak. He said that was impossible. No one could get through the trail. We said, we know. We didn't use the trail. We came straight up the mountain. He suggested we call the newspaper to tell this story. We said, "No! Please, don't tell anyone what we've done."

It was a dumb thing to do when warned by experienced climbers not to try. God was gracious to us, to our families, and to the rescue rangers who would have had to pick up our frozen carcasses in the morning. So ends the adventure of a lifetime.

Twice since then I have been back to the top of Pikes Peak, once by car, once climbing the real trail. Each time I was again astounded at the impossibly steep snow-covered rocks we climbed over to get to the top just in the nick of time. Once I descended the peak, hiking down. Along the way I stopped to tell hikers our story and show them the path we took. As we stood like dwarfs among those boulders I again reveled at the miracle of God's care. Each time they would give me a curious look and slowly smile saying, "You're making that up aren't you?" I would affirm it to be true, but inevitably they would look back at the trail we took and shaking their heads saying, "Impossible, absolutely impossible, nobody could do that." As I meandered my way down the mountain, with tears in my eyes, again and again, I too looked back, shook my head and said, "Yes Lord, it is impossible. But you gave us the wings of eagles!"