Mountains and Valleys

A Short Essay

What is it about valleys that give Christians such a case of heartburn? I mean, really! Take a look at how we use the metaphor of being in the valley and you will understand what I am saying. We talk about the valley of death, or rather the valley of the shadow of death – there’s a big difference between death and the shadow of death – and the valley of despair, and so on. (The valley of death was where Tennyson’s Light Brigade met its ignominious – and abrupt – end.) So many of our metaphors for pain, suffering and sorrow are centered in valleys.

Our opposing and supposedly more triumphant metaphor is the mountain top. We talk about climbing the mountain and the view from the mountain and being on top of the mountain so much that I wonder if anyone has actually been on a real mountaintop, or noticed that there is something off kilter with both metaphors. We try to avoid the valleys, though it’s awfully hard to avoid valleys and pretty easy to stay away from mountain tops.

Yes, mountains are symbols of strength, of grandeur, and even eternity. We watch documentaries of climbers crawling up Mount Everest and vicariously climb with them from the comfort and safety of our living rooms. And we dream. Yes, we dream.

Mountain tops are wonderful places to visit, but you really don’t want to stay there. I’m not talking about the oversized hills some people call mountains, you understand, I am talking about those peaks which jut up and slice into the sky like a knife at the throat of heaven. That kind of mountain.

Standing on a mountain top is a wonderful experience, but it is also a bit like going to Crazy Aunt Nellie’s house – it takes awhile to get there, you know it’s going to be an ordeal and full of the unexpected, and so there is a sense of apprehension, and it’s Ok for a bit – but then you just have to get out of there. Why? Mountain tops are cold. The air is thin. The wind blows. The weather changes on a dime and there is no shelter. There’s no water, and no food. Nothing grows. In fact, all you have to survive with is what you carried up the mountain on your back. Even professional mountaineers will tell you that the mountain top is a great place to visit and an exhilarating experience, but you need to get started downward almost as soon as you finish going upward – or you could die.

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I will concede one thing – the view in the valley just ain’t up to the view high on the mountain. All those trees get in the way. And yes, there are shadows in the valley, and dangerous things may lurk there, but it is the maybe/maybe not dangers which reside in the valley and the certain/absolute dangers which are on the mountain top. Possibility versus you betcha.

We need the valley. Water is in the valley, and food, and shelter, but the mountain top has none of these. In fact, everything you need to survive and thrive is found in the valley and not at the top of the mountain. You cannot lie down beside still waters on the mountain top, only in the meadow, which is in the valley. Lying down on the rocks at the top quickly becomes unbearable.

We can survive without the mountain top, but not without the valley. Like I said, everything we need is in the valley. In the valley is where God prepares a feast for us in the middle of our hungry enemies and where our cups run over. And goodness and mercy hunt us down and capture us forever.

Still, we metaphorically see the valley as a place of fear. This points out the paradox – the valley is a symbol of life and contentment, but also turmoil and death. It is both. In fact, in the valley is where we gain nourishment and grow strong; otherwise, we can never even attempt climbing the mountain. Yes, I know, the mountain calls us upward. It is mysterious and the mystery draws us towards it like moths to the open flame – and sometimes with the same ending.

Don’t get me wrong; I like mountains! I really do! I love flying past Mt. Rainier going in and out of Seattle, and Mt. Hood near Portland. Driving up to Paradise Lodge on Mt. Rainier on a bright summer day is an incredibly beautiful journey. And then to have lunch on the terrace, well, wow! But then I have to remember that everything at the lodge had to be brought up the mountain, for it originated down lower. In the valley. I did some climbing on Mt. Rainier when I was younger. With Paradise as the starting point, it does not take much climbing towards Camp Muir across the rocks and ice to remember what a dangerous place it is. One day we heard the crash of huge boulders tumbling down the mountain above us and getting closer, but we could not see them until they fell through the clouds not too far above our heads. We saw them too late to dodge, but they missed (obviously). You really don’t want to live there.

I know why we fear the valley. Our pain lives there. And our uncertainty. And loneliness. All things we would rather avoid. Yet the way into the sunshine is not in avoiding these and going deeper into the shadows, nor in climbing the mountain, but in embracing them, in drawing
them into us and feeling them in all their intensity. And being silent as we let God whisper his incredible love into our ears as he heals these deep wounds and fills the empty places. And as the intensity pain, uncertainty, and loneliness lessen, we grow stronger, and more ready to climb the mountain not to avoid the valley, but to embrace life as it is meant to be.

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