

The Upward Trail

First Person Essay

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For Dad, Micah, Uncle Mark, and me, hiking the Grand Canyon had been a long-time dream, and I couldn't believe that we were already halfway done. Our eight-mile trek into the belly of the monstrous canyon along the South Kaibab Trail had taken the better part of a day. After spending the night at Phantom Ranch, we packed our gear and prepared to hike out via the nine-mile Bright Angel Trail. This was the part of the trip that put me on edge because three-fourths of the elevation change occurs in the last four miles of this daunting path.

"Hey, Mark, are you feeling okay?" I questioned noticing my uncle's unusually pale face.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Bub," he responded with a forced grin. "My stomach is just a little upset."

His tone indicated that something was wrong, but there was little that I could do. We were nine miles from the rim of the canyon with no way to get help. Our only option was to hike out.

Mark will be fine, I thought, shoving my concerns to the back of my mind. *He works outside all day in the hot Oklahoma sun.*

Struggling through the deep sand along the bank of the Colorado River and back up the narrow, rocky incline exhausted Mark. Quiet groans now replaced his usual wisecracks, so we decided to stop to rest for a few minutes.

"Here, Mark," I offered, "eat some trail mix."

"No thanks, Hayden. I don't think my stomach could handle it," he declared, gulping water from his Camelpack.

Well, at least he's staying hydrated, I consoled myself.

After finishing off the food in our packs, our caravan hit the trail once more. Yesterday's carefree optimism and rapid pace were now replaced by gritty determination and dogged steps up the seemingly endless trail. Towering above, the barren sandstone cliffs seemed to imprison us.

Surely, I thought to myself, Mark can push through the pain for the last three miles.

About one hundred feet from the final water stop, he suddenly announced, "I think I'm about to faint." Unable to stand any longer, Mark painfully lowered himself onto a nearby boulder, sweating profusely. It was apparent to all of us that he was in serious trouble. I was terrified.

Frantically, I questioned Dad, "What are we going to do? Is he going to make it?"

"No breakfast and all this sweating have probably made him low on sodium. If we get him some salty food, he should be okay."

"But where? How?" I persisted, knowing that every last bite of our food was gone.

"I don't know, son," Dad admitted.

Praying silently, I hurriedly reviewed our options. It was 1:00 p.m. on a sweltering July day. Dad was extremely fatigued already; I knew that he couldn't hike to the rim for food. My younger brother had expended much of his strength carrying a massive pack all the way from the bottom. That left me.

After a few moments of uneasy silence, I blurted out, "I'll go get him food and bring it back."

"No, son, that would mean that you would have to hike two miles uphill to the rim, get the food, bring it back, and then hike out again!"

"Dad," I begged, "you know it's the only way."

After a brief pause, Dad agreed wearily, “Okay, but let’s pray that we can get in touch with Mom and tell her to meet you at the trailhead with some food.”

God answered our prayer. The call went through from deep inside the Grand Canyon where few people have cell phone reception.

Not wanting to waste any time, I started climbing with relentless determination. I felt heroic. After a few hundred yards though, my gallant notions began to erode. Almost immediately, the path increased dramatically in grade. With every step, the pain in my legs intensified. My muscles knotted and threatened to spasm, but Mark was counting on me. I ignored the other hikers; instead, I prayed with each agonizing step, fixing my eyes on the distant building that the marked the end of the trail.

At last, I glimpsed my mom waiting at the switchback just above me. With renewed commitment I staggered to her and gave her a big hug. Since both of us were deeply concerned about Mark, we lost no time talking. Hastily, we stuffed candy bars, pretzels, and Gatorade into my backpack. I paused just long enough to let Mom pray over me and to guzzle some of the Gatorade and eat a Snickers bar. Then I headed back along the trail that was now shaded by lengthening shadows.

My muscles burned. The sixteen miles that I had traveled in the last twenty-four hours had drained the very last of my reserves. However, when I thought that I could go no further, God sustained me. Relentlessly, I hiked downward. Through the haze of my fatigue, I caught sight of Dad and Micah supporting Mark as he shuffled along, leaning heavily on his hiking poles. With renewed determination, I kept up the pace.

Reaching the three of them, I thrust my backpack at Dad gasping, “The food’s in here.” Then I slumped down into the rocky dust of the trail while Mark slowly nibbled the salty food

and sipped the Gatorade. After a few minutes, it became clear that Mark was regaining a little strength.

“Okay, boys,” he whispered faintly, “I think I can make it.”

The next hour was grueling. The four of us lurched up the trail at a painfully slow pace. My legs felt like Jell-O, and my feet throbbed with every step. However, through God’s grace we finally made it to the rim where the rest of our family waited. Together we rejoiced as never before. We had endured. We had overcome.

Eight months have passed since our triumphant convoy reached the summit of the Bright Angel Trail. For me, that arduous hike out of the Grand Canyon now symbolizes life’s journey. Each day, I struggle toward heaven along a narrow path marked by great hardship and fatigue. In fact, the farther I travel, the more challenging the pathway becomes. However, I do not walk alone; I walk the trail with my fellow Christians. I depend on them, and they depend on me. For this reason, I will relentlessly press toward my eternal goal, encouraged by the teaching of my beloved Guide: the prize goes not to the swiftest, but to those who endure.