



THE MOUNTAINS ARE CALLING

Making the Climb
for a Clearer View of God
and Ourselves

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JARRETT STEPHENS

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*To Debbie and my girls: Riley, Kelsey,
Landry, and Cameron.*

*There is no one I would rather ascend the
mountains of life with than you.*

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Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the LORD surrounds his people,
from this time forth and forevermore.

PSALM 125:1–2

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And I Must Go

*The mountains are calling and I must go, and I
will work on while I can, studying incessantly.*

JOHN MUIR, IN AN 1873
LETTER TO HIS SISTER

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I was not familiar with the name John Muir until a friend of mine who knew I was working on this project introduced me to him and his life's work. Most people knew him as "John of the Mountains." Muir was a naturalist and wrote a number of books describing his exploits and adventures traveling through and living in the mountains.

Google search his name and this quote will appear eventually: "The mountains are calling and I must go." You can find it on everything these days from T-shirts to coffee mugs. But it is actually an abbreviated quote. What's missing from the usual quote is this: "and I will work on while I can, studying incessantly." Sure, those missing words don't make a big difference, but they do shed some light on the purpose behind Muir's mountain travels. They were not just weekend getaways but rather intentional journeys with the goal of bringing information and inspiration back to the people down below. Muir clearly felt both privilege and responsibility in relation to wonders such as Yosemite and the Sierras and refused to keep to himself what he had learned and experienced in the mountains. He was working for his generation and, whether he realized it or not, for generations to come.

Above and Beyond the Normal of Life

I'm no John Muir, but a few years ago I flew to Colorado to preach at a summer camp for the high school students from our church,

Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas. As a twenty-eight-year veteran of church camps, I had a pretty good understanding of the summer-camp environment. Some of you who grew up in church, know this environment too. These camps provide a reprieve from the routine of life. Cell phone use is limited so there is a break from technology and the social media that so often fights for the students' attention. For a week, students learn what it means to seek after and worship the Lord without the everyday responsibilities that typically preoccupy their minds and fill their schedules.

I initially thought I'd come to the camp and use some sermons that I had in my preaching arsenal. After preaching at years of camps, I knew exactly what type of messages the students needed to hear: sermons on salvation and holiness, calling the students to revival and away from rebellious living. Why reinvent the wheel? I'd just take a few old sermons, freshen up the illustrations, and rehash them to the best of my ability.

But on this particular occasion, I couldn't shake the thought that I needed to do something new. It was as if God was letting me know that old, leftover sermons just weren't going to work, at least not that summer.

As I began to think and pray about the week, I started reading through my Bible and asked God to give me a series of messages that would really challenge and encourage the students to engage with Christ like never before. I wanted God to speak to me and speak to the students in a fresh way. After all, this was camp, and

I wanted these high schoolers to leave camp the same way I did all those years I attended as a camper. I wanted them to have a “mountaintop experience” with God.

If you have been a follower of Jesus for very long, you know what I mean by that term “mountain-top experience.” It’s a high mark in your walk with the Lord. You sense a closeness to him like never before. His presence is near. Your spiritual vision seems clear, and your resolve to follow him no matter what the cost is strong. It’s here that personal resolutions are made and personal convictions are solidified. From a spiritual standpoint, it’s as if you’re on top of the world.

This is what I wanted the students to experience, and this was on my mind as I was flying over the mountains to preach at camp that summer. It was in this moment God led me to begin thinking through and reflecting on my own mountaintop experiences with him through the years. Many of them occurred at a camp just like the one where I was headed. While overlooking the mountains below, I sensed this question stirring in my heart: *Why not preach to the students about the mountaintop experiences found throughout the Scriptures?*

Now, I am not one who claims to hear the audible voice of God. I read the Bible. I pray. I enjoy listening to the preaching of God’s Word and have a lot of friends who can speak godly counsel into my life. Through the years, these are the normal avenues that I have found myself “hearing from the Lord.” On that airplane though, the still small voice speaking to me at thirty thousand feet

seemed louder than ever. It was a word the Lord was speaking straight to my heart, and it quickly became a quest. I knew what God wanted me to do. He wanted me to take these students to the mountains of Scripture to experience him.

So I started studying the mountaintop moments in the Bible. I began reading every reference to mountains I could find and was blown away by what I discovered. I had no idea how many epic stories of faith that we read in our Old and New Testaments happened on mountains. It seemed that often when God wanted to reveal a truth, command commitment from the people, or instruct in a significant way, he would call his prophets or his people to a mountain.

- Abraham was called to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah and learned there that God would provide for him and meet his needs.
- Moses not only met God in a burning bush on a mountain but was allowed into the presence of God and given the Ten Commandments on top of Mount Sinai.
- Elijah battled the prophets of Baal and found God to be an all-consuming power on Mount Carmel.
- Jesus preached his first major sermon not from the synagogue in his hometown or the temple in Jerusalem but on the side of a mountain in Galilee . He modeled intimacy with God throughout his ministry as he broke away from the crowds and went to unspecified

mountains to pray. He revealed his glory to his disciples in the Transfiguration on Mount Hermon. His suffering, betrayal, ascension, and eventual return all happen on a mountain called Olivet . He gave the church its mission statement from an unnamed mountain in Galilee).

So many of the most important events and teachings of Scripture took place on mountaintops. I was amazed at this truth that I was personally uncovering for the first time.

When we landed in Colorado, I was ready to preach. I just had to decide which mountains I would use to show the students how God worked, how he moved on these mountaintops. The journey we walked together those days in Colorado made for an incredible summer camp.

It was fun seeing God move in the hearts of the students that week in the same way he had moved in mine through the years. It was rewarding watching as campers worshipped him with undivided hearts, enjoyed community with limited distractions, and gave their lives to Christ for the first time. Let's just say it was transformative in my own life too. Through my preaching about the mountaintop moments in Scripture, we had our own mountaintop experiences with God in the mountains of Colorado. And I have returned often to the truths we talked about that week at camp.

For a number of years, I've thought about that series of messages and what God did in my heart that summer. What made it

so special? What was it about these mountains in Scripture that seemed to move me and the students to respond to God in the way that we did that week? It was a question I carried for some time.

Ironically, I finally figured out the answer to this question on another mountaintop. A few years ago my family went with some friends to Red River, New Mexico. While it's often a destination for college students during spring break, during the summer it's more tame and family friendly. We were excited about getting out of the blistering heat of Dallas and found what we were looking for in the cooler weather of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near Taos.

Red River has a population of less than five hundred, though it swells to quite a bit more during the different seasons. Each year my girls enjoy riding a ski gondola up the mountain. They love trying to spot animals in the woods beneath us on the way up, while I nervously arm-guard them and make sure they don't fall off. On the way down, they like to look into the tiny town far below and try to find the place where we are staying or point out where we will eat ice cream later that evening. It always amazes me how different the view is from the top of the mountain. From the top, the small town looks even smaller. Nature, and by extension God, looks so much bigger. The view from the mountain puts things into perspective.

I believe the same can be said about studying these mountains in Scripture. And I think this is what made that week of camp so

unique and memorable. Life comes at us pretty hard, pretty fast, and on a pretty consistent basis. But on the mountain, God gives his people a respite. When we encounter him, things change.

Simply Nothing like It

My family loves the ministry of Sky Ranch and attends the family camp they host each year in Ute Trail, Colorado. If you haven't figured it out by now, I'm a fan of camp and trying to pass this love on to my kids. For the last few years we have made our way to this camp and take great pride in being a part of what they call "Week One." You would think it would be better to go to camp later in the summer after the counselors have had some experience with other families and have gotten all the kinks worked out for camp. But we have found our niche and also some of our best friends in attending that first week. What I like most about it is that it starts the summer off, right out of the gate. The kids are out of school on Friday and we are in Colorado by Sunday.

With four girls under the age of twelve, loading up the car and taking off on the two-day, fifteen-hour drive north through Texas has its challenges. I have no idea how parents in the previous generations made it without technology. I thank God for movies and earbuds. They keep me sane on these long trips. It's always a welcome sight to see the terrain change and feel the weather getting cooler as we enter the mountains of Colorado. We absolutely love it. It may take a day or two to shift gears in our thinking, but

jump-starting the summer in this way forces us to slow down and really take in the fact that vacation has begun.

There are twelve or so cabins on the campground of Ute Trail, and each family is assigned to its own. Because of the size of our family, we get the same large cabin every year. It is only a few yards away from a small pond and surrounded by mountains on every side. The setting is beautiful as the campground sits right in the middle of the Gunnison and Rio Grande national forests. It's the perfect backdrop. There is not much better than getting up early, grabbing a cup of coffee, and watching the sun rise over the Rockies. And there, each morning, I make it a practice to spend time alone with God. I breathe in the fresh air. I take in his creation. I pray. There is simply nothing like it.

After breakfast, all the people in the camp make their way down to a little white chapel for morning worship. Situated away from everything else on the campsite, in the middle of an open field, it looks as if it could be a small schoolhouse on the set of *Little House on the Prairie*. The back of the chapel is solid glass that gives a breathtaking view of the snow-covered mountain range looming over the camp. On the walls of the chapel, ten stained-glass windows, five on each side, share the story of redemption from episodes in Scripture, and between those walls are about twenty rows of pews. My family fills an entire row every morning.

Morning worship is usually rather simple. There is one guitar, and two counselors sing familiar praise songs. And though the

morning worship time is not mandatory, I don't know of anyone who misses it. I certainly don't.

A couple of years ago, on a morning like any other, I was sitting in one of these worship moments. I was surrounded by family, holding one of my youngest in my arms. I don't remember the song we were singing, but I fell silent. I became acutely aware of my unworthiness before a holy God and at the same time was overwhelmed by his love and grace for me. I didn't deserve the wife who was worshipping by my side or the children whom he had blessed us with, and yet there we all were, worshipping Jesus as a family.

In that moment, it was as if time went into slow motion and God allowed me to see his eternal purpose for my life. Everything seemed to be at peace and to be right. A mountaintop moment that I wasn't expecting or looking for.

I realize we can't manipulate God and manufacture these times with him. But there is no denying we long for them. There is something in us that desires the presence of Jesus. We want him to draw close to us and reveal more of himself to us. We want and need to experience moments with him like this. Even as I write and think about God's moving in my heart and life as encapsulated in these memories, there is a longing in me to return to those places. I want to sense the nearness of God now as I did back then.

Maybe as you read you are having this same thought. It may even be why you picked up this book. You have memories of mountaintop moments in your life and want to experience God now the way you did on the mountain.

Here's what's interesting, though. I've discovered I don't have to go back to those literal places to have mountaintop moments with God. I can experience him now, right where I am. All I have to do is open my Bible, begin reading, and invite him to speak to me through his Word.

This is one of the main reasons I made the decision to write this book. I am convinced that God loves to give us mountaintop-type experiences with him and uses these times to draw us closer to him and propel us forward in our walk with him.

Mountaintop moments, moments when we ascend into God's presence, give us a taste of his glory and, like a carrot dangling in front of a rabbit, leave us longing and aching for more. A fresh glimpse of who he is pushes us more into his presence so that we can grow in our relationship with him and help change the world around us.

On the mountain, we discover two important truths. First, *God changes our perspective of who he is*. We learn that he is not a distant God uninvolved in and unfamiliar with his created world. Instead, he is concerned with the affairs of his children. He is interested in the smallest details of our lives and cares about what we are going through. He is a God who empathizes with us and desires to walk alongside us.

The second truth we discover on the mountain is *God changes our perspective of who we are*. It's on the mountain that God reveals to us our weaknesses and insecurities. We find in our relationship with him strength we didn't know existed. We see in

these moments that the world really does not revolve around us. We are given a mission and have a part to play in that mission that we could never imagine.

With a new perspective of God and a new perspective of ourselves, we walk into a new way of experiencing him. We are never the same after ascending the mountain.

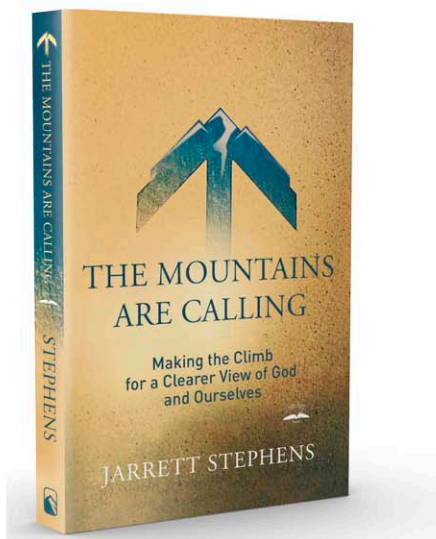
This book will cover ten mountaintop moments and how the events that took place (or will take place) affect our lives today. We'll discover together how much God loved taking people to places where he could change their perspective of who he is, places where he could change their perspective of who they were.

I should issue a warning, though. Like in all mountain climbing, we're not meant to live on the mountaintops. There comes a time when we must descend the mountain. In the same way, mountaintop experiences with God are not meant to last forever. They are moments in time, and just as we ascend and get a breathtaking view, there always comes a time when we must descend the mountain as well. We are meant to take what God did in us there, take what he taught us there, and allow it to help us change the world around us.

The mountains are still calling. God is still calling. He is issuing an invitation for us to join him today, an invitation to experience him unlike ever before. Let's ascend and make the climb together. We must go.

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