



MOUNTAIN DEVOTIONAL

MATTHEW 14:23

“And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone . . .”

EXPERIENCE

After the sunlight faded from the evening sky, we descended the mountain together. With the moonlight reflecting off the snow we barely needed our flashlights to see the path. On a cold February evening, my daughter and I had hiked the 1.4 miles up Balm of Gilead Mountain to see the sunset (pictured above). We went on this adventure for the beauty, for the challenge, and for the time alone with God. The sunset was breathtaking; indeed, the heavens were declaring the glory of God. After a full day of downhill skiing in the Adirondacks, an evening mountain climb was certainly a challenge. And prayer on the mountain was a refreshing encounter of basking in God’s presence. Now, on our way back to the trailhead, we reflected on our experience together even as we intently followed the dimly lit trail.

Perhaps you too have summited a mountain in winter, either by foot, or by ski lift. When skiing, I often try at some point to get a moment alone on the top of the mountain to pray. These times of prayer are usually brief, but they are rich. I also use rides up the ski lift as opportunities to pray individually or with whomever is with me. What made the prayer that night at the top of Balm of Gilead Mountain so special was the peaceful quiet of the moment, and that I had time to linger in the presence of my Maker. Take some time now to reflect on your most recent mountaintop moment with God.

CONTEMPLATION

There is just something about the top of a mountain that makes one feel close to God. We often describe spiritually enriching experiences as mountaintop moments because of the many transcendent events that God's people experienced on mountaintops in the Scriptures (Moses and the Burning Bush, Elijah on Mount Carmel, and Christ's Transfiguration to name a few). Are we really any closer to God on a mountain? No, the feeling of closeness is not justified, at least not in altitudinal terms. And yet, we might ask why God called Moses up mountains so many times to meet with him? We could consider why God led Elijah to Mount Horeb to meet with him? We might wonder why Jesus so often sought time to meet with his Father in prayer on mountains. Perhaps solitude is the answer. Mountains are often a means for escaping crowds and the hustle and bustle of life. Perhaps, like me, they were seeking a glimpse of God's glory (Psalm 19:1). I wonder if Moses, Elijah, and Jesus enjoyed many glorious sunsets, relishing the beauty of a painted sky. Perhaps the challenge of getting to the top was a means itself of reflecting on the difficulties of life and the solidness of the mountain underneath their feet a reminder of the immense strength of God—a strength to steady and sustain

them in the midst of struggles. What are your reasons for seeking the summit today?

PRAYER

Lord God, thank you for the message spoken through mountains. I am reminded of your majesty and your might. My heart is moved to worship you and you alone. Like Jesus, I long for time alone with my heavenly Father. Yet, I humbly confess that my mind is easily distracted. My heart is prone to wander. Meaningful connection with my Maker becomes an uphill battle. O Lord, you are my strength. Make my feet like the deer's, make me tread on my high places (Habakkuk 3:19). Draw near to me that I might experience the goodness of your presence and the power to pray undistractedly and wholeheartedly.

CONFIRMATION

On four specific occasions, Jesus sought his Father's presence in prayer on mountaintops. Before choosing his twelve disciples, Jesus prayed all night long on top of a mountain (Luke 6:12). After hearing of John the Baptist's brutal death and then immediately feeding more than five thousand people, Jesus sought solitude on a mountain to pray (Matthew 14:23). Jesus took Peter, John, and James up a mountain to pray and as he was praying Jesus was transfigured before the three disciples (Luke 9:28-29). Lastly, it was Jesus's custom to pursue solitude and prayer on the Mount of Olives, most famously on the night he was betrayed and arrested (Luke 22:39-40).

Jesus's practice is not necessarily prescriptive for believers, as if pursuing mountaintops will automatically bring a Christian closer to God. Yet, Jesus's example of seeking time alone to pray is beneficial, especially to the extent that it models efforts made to draw near to God (James 4:8). Yes, seeking time alone to pray is as simple as

finding a closet or empty room (Matthew 6:6), but often meaningful solitude is not so simple to attain. It was not easy for Jesus to get alone with his heavenly Father amidst life's many demands, sometimes it took a mountain climb.

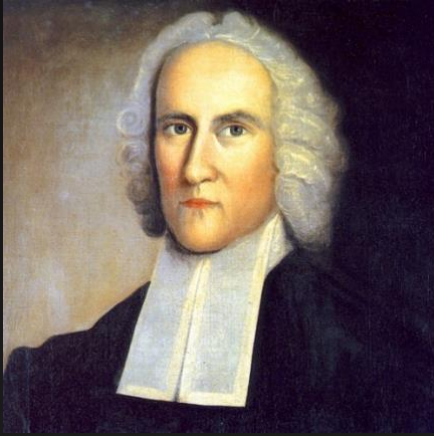
Getting meaningful time alone with our Creator can be difficult for us too. We also face life's demands and are prone to all manner of distractions. So, to the extent that climbing a mountain is helpful, to the extent that the challenge of ascending is emblematic of the challenge to get alone or the difficulty of posturing one's heart for prayer, then follow the Savior's lead and get up there to the mountaintop.

- A mountain is an emblem of challenge, of an obstacle in life's journey.
- A mountain is a place to seek God's presence in prayer and a place for worship, a place, historically and biblically, where God's people have sought to draw near to God.
- Mountains are places to behold beauty (such as sunsets, sunrises, overlooks, and vistas).

The View from Balm of Gilead Mountain in the Daylight

- We hiked it again the next day for another look.





Jonathan Edwards

FROM *IMAGES OF DIVINE THINGS* #66. [WJE 11:72-73]

“Hills and mountains, as they represent heaven, so they represent eminence in general, or any excellent and high attainment. And as hills, especially high mountains, are not ascended without difficulty and labor, and many rocks and steep places are in the way, so men don't attain to anything eminent or of peculiar excellence without difficulty.”¹

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Typological Writings*, WJE 11:72-73.