

## Climbing Mount Sinai

*Jonathan Gallagher*

OK, so I'm no Moses. But when they asked if I'd like to climb Mount Sinai, I was willing. It would be a pleasant experience, I was sure. The thought that I'd see just what Moses saw. Follow in his footsteps. See for myself—that kind of thing (accepting for the moment that the Mount Sinai that the Bible mentions is actually in Sinai, and not in Saudi Arabia or somewhere else.)

Well, Moses may have been eighty plus when he climbed that mountain, but for sure he was in better shape than I was.

A few days of "Rameses' Revenge" had ravaged my food absorption capacity. To say I was feeling weak would be an understatement. Not only had my stomach been "upset," I had not wanted to eat anything either. All I'd had was liquids.

Then we'd driven all night across the Sinai peninsula from Cairo. Sleep deprivation is a terrible thing. The plan had been to arrive at 4a.m., and climb in the dark to avoid the blazing heat of summer. But a discussion with the bus driver as to how many should be on the bus had delayed us, and we arrived late, with the sun very much up in the sky. Time to decide.

I look around. The few Sinai rosefinches that had been hopping around the parking lot have disappeared into the dark shade of the monastery trees. A brace of sand partridges scuttle away into a deep crevice in the rocks for their siesta. The hamster-like desert hyraxes head for their burrows. It is *hot!*

At that point our friendly leader announces that I have to lead the party to the top, because of his recent heart surgery.

They place a two-liter bottle of water in my hand, point to the path up, and say "Walk!" My mind recites the words of Christina Rossetti's poem "Up-Hill": "Does the road wind up-hill all the way? –Yes, to the very end." It certainly looks like that...

My heart sinks. In my feeble condition, I am never going to make it. I take a few steps. I admit to myself that this is not the pleasant tourist event I'd expected. More of an epic trek, closer to the ascent of Everest than a pleasant promenade along a beach boardwalk. Muttering under my breath I drag my reluctant body up the trail.

"Lord, this isn't going to work. Help me find a way out. This is one climb I'd rather not make."

My Egyptian friends bound ahead like mountain goats. I try to fool my brain by concentrating on the marvelous landscape. "What a magnificent place!" I tell myself. 'A

stark and rugged grandeur. A dramatic place for the divine-human encounter. Imagine Moses climbing...'

No, not that. Don't focus on the climbing, the agonizing stretch of tortured muscles, the shortness of breath, the fainting from the blazing sun pouring molten metal heat out of a furnaced sky...

Too late. Already I have to stop. I fake it by looking around as if I'm amazed by the spectacular view. Surreptitiously I take some swigs of water from my bottle.

"Lord, I'm not going to make it. Let me stop now. Enough is enough—this is foolish."

A companion distracts me with a smile and a question: "So, you like visiting Egypt?"

Sure. The pyramids were fine, complete with friendly taxi driver and helpful hosts. The museum was enchanting, full of objects and images of former glories. The reason I'd come—the lectures, presentations, outreach—had been fulfilling. But this...

I force a smile back and nod. Even speaking is an effort.

"OK Lord, this is it. I need real help, now. If I'm ever going to make it to the top, I need you. I can't make it by myself."

Not an instant in-filling of power, but I recognize my steps are easier. I look up, and set off again. Progress, at least. We walk for nearly an hour. And I can see the end in view—a small building on an outcrop.

"So we're almost there?" I ask.

"What over there? No, that's not it. The top of Mount Sinai is up there." My helpful respondent points almost vertically up to a point my eyes can hardly make out. My heart not only sinks but hits the bottom of the seabed.

I'm back on my knees, literally and spiritually.

"Lord, really? I know this climb is impossible. I have no energy, I'm unfit, and I haven't eaten in days. My legs are already tired out, my muscles are sore, and my head is spinning. I can't do it!" I'm about to sit down and argue petulantly. 'Another fine mess you got me into'—and all that.

But a voice, still and small, whispers in my ear, "I know."

And I know I should not complain any more.

"Yes, you can't do it. Good. Now get up. I am with you. And I am with you always, even to the end of the world—and to the top of Mount Sinai, too."

I stand up. Step by step, God gets me to the top of that burning mountain, blazing under the merciless sun. Miraculously, (and I mean that in the most literal use of the word), I am standing on the peak of Mount Sinai.

As we worship, sing and praise, I am praising the more. For Sinai has been conquered, but not by me. Conquered totally by grace! For it was God who took me to the top, not by my own weak and feeble efforts, but by his all-transforming power of grace:

Grace to energize the muscles of my legs.  
Grace to motivate my mind.  
Grace to smile, despite the situation.  
And grace abundant to save all who come to him.

Looking out over the valleys and plains below, in my mind's eye I can see the camp of Israel, stretching wide, with their fires sending gray smoke trails to ascend with their prayers to heaven. In their fear, they had promised, "All that the Lord says, we will do!" But as Moses communed with the Lord here, the people of God soon forgot their contractual promise. They cast the golden calf and partied as the pagans.

So God in his infinite mercy gives the commandments, to show the way they are to live. Tragically they too become the objects of legalism, and not the agents of grace that God would desire. For they are descriptions of the way God's people will choose to live, not the demands of some system of legal observance. The Pharisees had it oh-so-wrong, and they are the descendants of those who saw the God of Sinai as law-demander, not grace-giver.

Standing on Mount Sinai, repeating the commandments, they are what I choose, not what I am obligated to do in order to achieve salvation. They are the descriptions of the kind of ideals I want in my life, not the means of gaining heaven.

After all, as a child of God, should I ever even think of killing or stealing or committing adultery? God, keep me from such thoughts as I live my life, agreeing with you that your ways are true and right.

I sit and admire the view, and admire still more the glorious goodness and grace of God. My muscles still ache, my body still complains, but I am here with you Lord, my gracious God.

As I tear myself away to leave, I'm thankful for the lesson in grace at Sinai.

Then it occurs to me. "Oh, and Lord: one more thing..."

"Could you please get me back down again?"

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