

# “Landing Safely”

Matthew 17:1-9; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 <sup>1</sup>

I've always enjoyed flying. I enjoy the incredible vistas from 35,000 feet as I crisscross this great land, but what I like best is taking off and landing. I enjoy the rush of thousands of pounds of thrust hurling a huge piece of metal into the sky, and I enjoy that same thrust as it is redirected to slow the plane when we're back on the ground.

It seems to me that landing an aircraft must be more difficult than getting it into the air. Becoming airborne appears to be basically a matter of going really fast and pulling back on the trim controls. Landing, though, is another matter.

Landing requires navigating yourself to an airport, descending in an appropriate manner, and hitting the right part of the runway with the right part of the plane at the right time and at the right speed. That seems much harder to me, though I may be mistaken.

Mountain climbing is similar to flying in that it's often easier to get up than it is to get down. The most famous mountain in the world is of course Mt. Everest, since at 29,035 feet it's the highest peak on the planet.

People have been trying to climb Everest since 1921. Eleven thousand non-Sherpas have attempted the climb and about 3,000 have made it—but 207 didn't. This means that for every 100 people who made it to the top, seven died in the attempt; most of them on the way down.<sup>2</sup> I'll stick to flying.

In a somewhat similar way, when you and I have truly wonderful spiritual experiences, we often refer to them as “mountaintop” experiences, and the last forty days have been such a time for many of us. During *40 Days of Purpose* nearly all of us have invested extra time in reading, in study, in prayer, and in spiritual conversation with each other. From what I hear, that experience has been positive for almost everyone, and life-changing for many. We've truly been on the mountaintop together.

Peter, James, and John had such an experience in this morning's text. Jesus had taken them with him up a high mountain, and as they watched, *“Jesus' appearance changed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothing became dazzling white. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus. Peter blurted out, ‘Lord, this is wonderful! If you want me to, I'll make three shrines, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’*

*“But even as he said it, a bright cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him. Listen to him.’ The disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground.*

*“Jesus came over and touched them. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘don't be afraid.’ And when they looked, they saw only Jesus with them. As they descended the mountain, Jesus commanded them, ‘Don't tell anyone what you have seen until I, the Son of Man, have been raised from the dead”* (Matthew 17:1-9, NLT).

After such an experience as this, the disciples wanted to stay on the mountain, just as we often do. They didn't want to return to ordinary life “in the valley.” But you know, not much

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 20, 2016, Palm Sunday

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.adventurestats.com/tables/EverestAgeFat.shtml>

<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/news-blog/death-on-mount-everest-the-perils-o-2008-12-10/>

grows high on a mountain. Mountains are good for inspiration, but the harvests come from the valleys. Motivation comes on the mountain, but growth comes in the valley.

It seems to me that there are some similarities between our situation as we “come down” from *40 Days* and the danger involved in landing a plane or descending from Everest. To mix those images, I’ve called this sermon “Landing Safely,” and I want to structure the remainder of it using five survival rules for mountain climbing.<sup>3</sup>

1. **Respect the Dangers of the High Places.** We’ve given ourselves to focused spiritual growth for the past six weeks, and whenever we make ourselves more available to God, either individually or together, we show up more prominently on Hell’s radar, and sinister agents are dispatched against us.

It takes a lot of energy to get to the mountaintop, which means that we’re tired as we turn to make our way down. It may also be that a certain sense of achievement causes us to relax our guard toward the forces arrayed against us.

One of the dangers in being tired is that we may not be as careful about how we say things. I know that when I’m tired I often have to ask God to “*Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips*” (Psalm 141:3).

2. **Respect the weather on the mountain, and use appropriate protection.** The most dangerous enemy is the one we don’t expect and aren’t prepared to engage. Weather in the high places can turn what looked like an easy climb into a deadly situation, and it is so in the high places of the spirit as well.

It’s important to remember that we must battle spiritual enemies in spiritual ways. As Paul put it, “*We use God’s mighty weapons, not mere worldly weapons, to knock down the Devil’s strongholds*” (2 Corinthians 10:4). We can’t examine them here, but we’d all be wise to review the spiritual protection available to us as we come down from the mountain. You’ll find it described in Ephesians 6:10-20.

3. **Stay connected to each other.** Mountain climbers connect themselves with ropes, both for fall protection and as a means to avoid becoming lost in the blinding snow. We, too, have learned the importance of community connections “on the mountaintop,” and we will be wise to continue to nurture the relationships we’ve established and deepened in the days ahead.
4. **Stay hydrated.** The health dangers of high altitude have as much to do with dehydration as they do with lack of oxygen. Just as plants wilt and climbers become mentally confused without water, so our spirits wilt and become confused without frequent refueling from God’s Word, prayer, and personal and corporate worship. It takes about six weeks—about 40 days—for a new habit to become established, and our forty-day journey has established the pattern of daily study and weekly worship. Don’t toss that nourishment over the cliff on the way down.
5. **Be alert for avalanches.** I’m told that there are ways to “read” the snow pack so as to avoid avalanches, but there’s really not much that can avert the destruction of an avalanche once it has begun. Wisdom avoids areas and conditions where avalanches are likely; and, if caught in one, hangs on, prays for survival, and prepares to deal with the destruction it leaves behind.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.mounteverest.net/expguide/survivalrules.htm](http://www.mounteverest.net/expguide/survivalrules.htm). The rules I cite were what was listed in 2004. The current rules vary somewhat.

Similarly, it sometimes happens that temptation attacks us on the way down spiritual mountains with a fury that is as overwhelming as an avalanche. But it is also sometimes in the most desperate situations that we learn the most about God's power. And that brings us to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote about the highest "spiritual mountaintop" recorded in the Bible, and about what the trip down was like: "*Let me tell about the visions and revelations I received from the Lord. I was caught up into the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether my body was there or just my spirit, I don't know; only God knows. But I do know that I was caught up into paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be told*" (1 Corinthians 12:1-4). Paul's experience was similar what Peter, James and John saw, only at what appears to be a higher level. But notice what happened next: "I've received wonderful revelations from God," Paul wrote, "*but to keep me from getting puffed up, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from getting proud.*"

Though there are many hypotheses, we don't know what kind of problem Paul was talking about, but it's clear that some physical disability came hard on the heels of his mountaintop experience, and that Paul attributed this pain to the work of Satan. "*Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away.*" Paul wrote. "*Each time [God] said, 'My gracious favor is all you need. **My power works best in your weakness**'*" (2 Corinthians 12:2-10).

Elsewhere Paul wrote that "*this light and power that now shine within us is held in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies. **So everyone can see that our glorious power is from God and is not our own***" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Paul's experience reminds us that the mountaintop is for inspiration and motivation; the valley is for growth and fruit. The point of our life on earth is not to have continuously cool spiritual experiences. The point of this life is that we allow God to so shape our character through all of our experiences that we will be willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him. The point of the trek up the mountain, as well as of the journey back down, is that you and I become more and more like Jesus.

God shapes our character into the character of Jesus in many ways, but all of these ways could be summarized in one word: OBEDIENCE. We trust God when we're on the mountaintop, *and we obey him*. We trust God when we're in the ordinary days in the lowlands, *and we obey him*. We trust God when we walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death, *and we obey him*.

Selective obedience is not obedience at all. God calls us to obey all that is written in His Word, in good times, in bad times, in glorious times, in horrible times. The point of this life is character, and character is shaped in the choices of everyday life.

To return to where we began, getting the plane in the air is important; but getting it down safely is much more important. There are times when you and I manage to land "on the runway," and there are times when we crash and burn, as many biblical characters did. The good news is that though we fail, God never does. The good news is that though spiritual avalanches sometimes overwhelm us, "*there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1).

Yes, we're coming down from the mountaintop, but we don't descend alone. "The Master has come, and he calls us to follow the track of the footprints he leaves on our way. Far over the mountain and through the deep hollow, the path leads us on to the mansions of day. . . . The Master has called us; the road may be dreary, and dangers and sorrows are strewn on the track. But God's Holy Spirit shall comfort the weary; we follow the Savior and cannot turn back. The Master has called us: though doubt and temptation may compass our journey, we cheerfully

sing: 'Press onward, look upward,' through much tribulation. The children of Zion must follow their King!"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Doudney, "The Master Hath Come."