GRAND TETON CLIMB/LESSONS

The following very lengthy account of my climb of the Grand Teton will not do the experience justice. I will attempt to describe the event adequately, but no one will ever really understand what it was like that day. It has changed my life for the better, and the lessons learned have been many. I will first describe the blow by blow account of the climb, and will then share some of the lessons learned through it.

Preparations

Around January of 2002, I was eating lunch at the Manwaring Center here on campus. I spotted a friend from the old high school years named Brent Ashcraft, who works in the bookstore. He was speaking with some fellows about his experience of climbing the Grand Teton the previous summer. I was quickly taken in with his descriptions of his climb and found out that over the last few years he has climbed several mountains that are significant in their challenge, including: Grand Teton, Mt. Teewinot, Mt. Buck, The Middle Teton, and The South Teton (all from that same mountain range). In addition, he has climbed Mt. Borah and several other local mountains that are smaller and less strenuous.

Brent and I were soon deep into a conversation about all of this, when he issued an invitation to me to climb the Grand with him during the summer. Brent knew nothing of my prior health problems, and I did not know if I could remotely be in shape enough to do such a thing.

I told Brent that I would consider it, and would let him know in a couple of months if I could be in the kind of physical condition I would need, and if I was brave enough to take on such a task.

In late winter, I informed Brent that I had “officially” decided to make the climb, and that I had been exercising consistently and would continue to do so over the next several months. He was happy that I would take the challenge, and so the physical and mental preparations began.

During the early summer, I took my last class at BYU, and so spent most of each week living in Provo with Shawn Edgington, and would commute home for the weekend. I was relentless in my physical preparations, though my conditioning had a long way to go to prepare me for such an ordeal. I remember many mornings when I did not feel like getting up to go exercise, and I would repeat the mantra in my mind that “I will never climb the Grand Teton by staying in bed today.” That seemed to pump me up, and off I would go to hit the treadmill. I worked up to about 60 minutes on the treadmill, though my pace was just about “nursing home” in it’s speed.

The Day of the Climb
Finally, the date we had chosen came. It was a sunny Friday on August 9, 2002. I picked up Brent at his home at 3:00 AM sharp. I had gotten to bed around 11:00 PM the night before and had a restless night of sleep. I had gotten up about 2:30 AM, ate as much breakfast as I could stand, showered, and then went to Brent's. He was ready to go.

It was still black outside, but the stars were visible and filled the sky. Brent was excited and we got on the road to Teton National Park. We drove the usual route from Rexburg to Driggs, and then over the Teton pass into the Jackson Hole area. From there we drove north into the Teton National Park. We went along the east side of the Teton peaks and parked in a place called Lupine Meadows. It was about 5:15 AM when we arrived.

After a snack, some water, and of course the last bathroom trip in a civilized restroom facility, we started up the trail. It was 5:30 AM. The sun was not up yet, though he was giving off some light in the far eastern direction. The parking lot was nearly completely full of cars, which indicated that there were many climbers already headed up the mountains. Most who climb the Grand Teton will go up about 3/4 the way the first day, and then summit the second day. They will then return down the mountain the second or even the third day. Brent and I planned to do the entire trip in one very long day.

We had talked about the climb on several occasions, and I had checked out library books about the climb and had at least some general knowledge about what I was about to experience. The round trip climb from Lupine Meadows to the summit of the Grand and back is about 18 miles. Though I had prepared with hour long treadmill workouts, I had no idea as I left that morning how taxing the climb would be on me.

The beginning stage of the trail takes you from the meadows through forest area and slowly works upward. The sun finally broke above the horizon and began to light up the side of the mountain that we were climbing. Morning sunshine is a beautiful thing, with it’s pastel hues and tints. I was loving it.

For the first 3 miles or so, the trail steadily goes upward in a south-western direction. Eventually it begins to switchback as it gets steeper. Feeling my oats a bit, I told Brent (whom I considered my SHERPA) that I was in good enough shape that if he wanted me to, I could pick up the pace a little. I was worried that he was holding back so as not to poop out the old man. But he informed me that our pace was perfect and the same pace that he always took. He stated that we would need to save ourselves a bit for later in the climb, which turned out to be prophetic and my first major lesson of the day. His pace was easy to keep up with, yet winded me a little, in part because of the ever increasing altitude.
The hike in those first few miles eventually exposes you to grand vistas to the east and south. Soon, you see two mountain lakes below you that sparkle in the sun, and are the most beautiful blue color you could imagine. The mountain is steep and one slip off the trail would send you down the side with speed and likely injury.

As the hike continued, we began to come around a kind of corner where the trail heads up what is called Cascade Canyon. It is the canyon that is in between the Grand Teton and the Middle Teton. The forest becomes thinner at this point, and you are walking along the edge of the mountain headed ever upward. Off to your left is a steep drop off of rock, boulders, etc. You can begin to see the Middle Teton, and to your immediate right as you look straight up, you see a huge tall mountain. I asked Brent if this was the Grand Teton, and he informed me that it was not, and was in fact called Disappointment Peak. He said that it was so named because most people get to that point and assumed that this huge mountain is the Grand, only to be disappointed to find out that it is not. In fact, though it looks massive, it is dwarfed by the Grand. But because it is literally right beside you, it cuts off the view of the Grand Teton until much further up the trail.

By about 5 or 6 miles up the trail I was finally beginning to feel the burn in my leg muscles. From my lower calf to my upper thigh, I was beginning to feel the strain of an ever upward climb. My legs were a bit wobbly and tired. As instructed by my Sherpa, I took in a steady flow of fluids and some trail mix. Being a diabetic, I worried that I would have some trouble, but because of my constant snacking throughout the day, I never had a single problem with my diabetes.

Several hours into our hike, we finally came to an area where we had to scramble over large boulders. I was a bit tired, but the new kind of terrain seemed to give me a shot of adrenaline and so I followed Brent closely. He was more accustomed to this kind of scrambling, and so my inexperience showed a bit here and he had to slow his pace somewhat so that I didn't get behind.

After the scrambling area, the incline of the hike increased even more. We came to a kind of mountain meadow where some hikers spend the night. There were a few small tents pitched and a couple of climbers who were eating breakfast. Brent had warned me that there is a kind of unique elitist culture and mentality of many of the climbers. When they would pass us on the trail and see us outfitted and dressed in a much more casual way than they would be, they would always ask us how far we intended to go up the mountain, with the obvious implication that we did not belong in their league. We were dressed in tee shirts, cut offs, and moderately priced hiking shoes, with a fanny pack to carry our water and snacks. The other hikers we passed we decked out with very large and expensive backpacks, hiking shoes that often cost a few hundred dollars (in fact, they would have
one pair to hike up the mountain in, and another pair with a different kind of sole to hike down), and special hiking shorts and shirts. We felt a little like the Beverly Hillbillies in comparison.

The hike continued up the mountains and finally became extremely steep past the upper meadows area as it continued toward what is called the lower saddle. The saddle is the bowing area in between the Grand Teton on the north and the Middle Teton on the south. The trail switches back and forth constantly and is mainly loose dirt and rock. Around that point, you can see above you a mountain stream that tumbles down with a small water fall that takes your breath away. The water is ice cold, as it's source is melting snow far above on the peaks of the mountains.

By that point of the morning, I was feeling the effects of the climb and began to secretly wonder if I had what it would take to make it to the top. The heat of the day also began to take it's toll on us, though the temperature was moderate, with only a breeze of wind in the air.

In late morning, we finally came to the area just below the lower saddle. To that point I had experienced hiking and scrambling, but now was to be my first true rock climbing experience. The climb is now nearly straight up, and the park service has attached a long and thick rope there which is about 300 feet in length to aid in the climb to the saddle. You must work your way up the rope, along a chimney (a kind of V in the rocks where you place feet on either side of the V and work your way up). I was quite awkward as I made my way up. Brent seemed to climb effortlessly and was patient as I cautiously lumbered up behind him. There were a few places when my feet slipped a bit, but I managed to keep a white knuckled grip on the rope.

At the top of the rope, the climb is no longer nearly straight up and so you are able to leave the rope and continue the climb another few hundred yards until you come onto the top of the saddle. The view takes your breath away, because now you can not only see to the east from whence you have come, but now can see over the mountains to the west. In the north, you can now see the Grand Teton in all of it's majesty, and to the south the Middle Teton. Below to the west, stands Table Mountain, a very difficult hike that most of us with youth groups have done. It seemed so very far below us!

We took a while to regain our energy. We ate lunch, drank some water, rested and mentally prepared for the next stage: the actual climb of the Grand. My legs were shaky, and we had already walked much farther in our hike that I had ever done in any of my training, and we still had the most difficult part left to do, PLUS to get ourselves all the way back down the mountain.
We began up the Grand and again the hike became extremely steep with a little scrambling over small rocks. After some time, it now turned into an experience that I thought I was prepared for, but was not. Brent is an experienced climber, but does not use safety ropes. He has done all of his climbs in a style called "Free Climbing." Every other climber we passed throughout the entire day were all repelling with ropes and safety devices. We came to a spot of another chimney of rock that went nearly straight up. Brent told me that this would be my first real test. Frankly, it seemed like there had already been plenty of tests, and I wasn’t ready to hear that this would be the first REAL one. Brent started up the chimney and I tried to follow as closely as I could. Wherever he put his foot, I put mine. Where he grabbed onto rock, I grabbed the same place. The rock offered little significant hand or foot holds, and most of what was available were small nubs and bumps. After climbing for several minutes, we came to the top of the chimney. The climb continued on for a while until we came to a place called, “The Eye of the Needle.” This is a small tunnel like place in the rock that you must bend down to get through. As you come out the other side, you are met by one of the scariest places in the whole climb, called the Belly Roll. There, you see a drop off of several thousand feet to the west, and you must literally hang off of a ledge (this is called "exposure") with little foot grip, and primarily hang from your finger ends and kind of work your way along this ledge about 25 feet to the other end, where you can pull yourself back up onto a kind of trail. Brent told me that continuing on from the Eye of the Needle was totally up to me. He showed how to cross the Belly Roll and said that I did not have to do it, but that he had confidence that I could. I was not there to fail or quit, so I mimicked his crossing as best as I could and made it across. I was exhilarated and scared at the same time. This was one of those points in these kinds of perilous experiences where you fight a mental battle. One part of you tells you to push yourself to new limits and vistas. Another side will bombard you with the rational reasons why you should turn back. At that moment, I felt a drive to continue upward.

After more rock climbing, we came to another spot much like the Belly Roll. It again had several thousand feet of exposure, where you are literally hanging by your fingers. Somehow, we made it beyond this as well. I could feel the burn in my legs intensely now as I worked muscles that had not been worked at all on the treadmill. My legs were wobbly and I got worried and wondered if I could really do this. But we moved on. We climbed more chimneys, scrambling up and around more large rock outcrops, and then at exactly 1:00 PM, we came to the Summit of the Grand Teton.

What would enter your mind at the summit of such a mountain? I admit that
the grandeur of the view took my breath away. The views of all directions, Jenny Lake, Mt. Moran, and all of the other Teton peaks, were all stunning. Yet, as I climbed the last few feet to the summit, it was the feelings of the gospel and of family that filled my mind. I immediately started to weep, and though quite physically tired, I felt a deep sense of personal victory. I could not help but recall the last couple of years as I have regained my health, dreaming of such a day as this. I thought a great deal of the temple blessings, and of my love for my family and friends. Oh to be alive again!

Brent had brought his cell phone with him in hopes that it might work atop the mountain. As luck would have it, it worked perfectly. I called my family, and found that they were astonished to hear from me from on top. My voice was weak from fatigue and from crying, and I could tell that they sounded a bit worried. But it was wonderful to hear their voices. Admittedly, I did have it pass through my mind that if something horrible would happen on the way down, that my conversation with them would long be remembered.

The summit is a clump of rocks and boulders of about 10-15 square yards. There were already 7-8 people there who had preceded us in our climb. Others came and went during our brief time on top of the mountain. Both Brent and I were wearing tee shirts with either Ricks College or BYU Idaho on them, and some of the people on top asked us some questions, which led us into a very brief missionary encounter. What a neat place to do missionary work!

We remained on top for only about ½ of an hour, and felt we should begin our descent. On the way up, I had many thoughts regarding how in the world you get off the mountain. If it is so difficult going up when you can see exactly where you need to grab a rock or place your foot, how do you do it going backwards? I expressed my concern to Brent and he gave his typical smile and again assured me that I could do it.

We backtracked our route and went back over all the same treacherous places. I managed to get my way though them with Brent’s leadership. It seemed that the pace of our descent began extremely slow due in part to my being careful, and also because now my leg muscles were so cramped and in such pain, that any movement became nearly impossible. This worried me, and for the first time I could see it in Brent’s face as well. We got down the most difficult rock climbing area and were still above the lower saddle by several hundred feet, and I was in such pain that I could barely move one foot in front of the other. I was embarrassed and refused to give in to the pain. We had summited by 1:00 PM, which as quick as most any group Brent had taken to the top, and he expected us to make it to the parking lot by around 8:00 PM that night. Even before we got back
down to the saddle, we could see that we would not even be close to making it by that time.

Arriving at the saddle was comforting mentally to me, because it meant that the constant death threat was over, and with the exception of making it down the rope to below the saddle, would be the last major rock climbing I would have to do.

After getting down the rope, I began the long and steep descent down the trail. Most experienced climbers will tell you that going down is often as difficult or more so than going up because of the strain on your leg and feet muscles. I understand that better now. My feet had developed several blisters and though they hurt, my leg muscles hurt so intensely that it far overshadowed the pain of my feet.

I found that I needed to stop frequently to rest my legs. I never struggled the entire day aerobically, and felt like I was in decent shape. But my legs had not been prepared for the type of movement they would have to do. Brent was patient as usual. We were running a bit short of water, food, and worse than that—out of sunlight. Because the sun would go down on the west side of the mountains, we would see our daylight leave very quickly. We felt we had come prepared, but it had never occurred to us that we would need flashlights.

Not far below the saddle I asked Brent if he would mind if I went first so that I wouldn’t feel so guilty about slowing him up, plus I felt like I might be able to push myself a little bit harder. He agreed and off I went. Each step down on the trail made me wince, and around 8:00 PM or so the sun set, and within a half of an hour, it was dark. Now, additional adventures began.

I knew that in the dark, if I mis-stepped from the trail, I would tumble down the mountain. There was very little moonlight, and though the stars shined clearly above, it was all I could do to make out the trail. On occasion, other hikers who were on their way down passed us with their lights, and didn’t seem to care or notice that I was hobbling along. Somehow, I never slipped off the trail. It was as though there was a kind of force that kept me moving along and protecting me so that I would not go over the edge. I seemed to always be able to make out a faint outline of the trail, again credited to a heavenly force beyond me.

With about 3 miles left to go, I finally hit a mental and physical barrier that I had never experienced in my life to this point. In sports through the years, I was always the kid who would run 21 wind sprints if the coach wanted me to run 20. I always stayed out longer than anyone else shooting extra free throws. I had always been able to will myself on past physical pain or fatigue. But, at that moment on the trail down from the Grand Teton, I could not find it within myself to take even one more step. I had “hit the wall” as marathoner’s refer to it. As a
psychologist, I thought I could understand the “wall” but when I experienced it for myself, it became an entirely different monster. I sat on a rock and pondered what to do. The thought occurred to me that I could not take another step without the help of God. I said to Brent, that “What I am about to ask you may seem a bit odd, but I need you to give me a priesthood blessing so I can make it off of this mountain.” Brent came around behind me, and in the pitch black of night, with the stars out in mass above us, he laid his hands upon my head and pronounced a blessing.

As he spoke, my mind raced and I heard little of what he said. I kept repeating over and over in my mind that “As soon as he says amen, I must get to my feet immediately, and walk in faith.” The amen came, I reached for Brent’s hand to help me stand, and off we went.

There was an instant difference in how I felt. But the blessing was fulfilled in God’s way. For some time I had been on the other side of the line where the pain felt unbearable and there wasn’t a drop on energy left in my leg muscles. Immediately after the blessing I again felt energy, but it was only enough to keep me walking. I felt less pain, but only enough to make it bearable. This was how God would answer my prayer. He would not take away the pain and give me full energy back. He would give me just enough strength and endurance to make it back, and no more.

We continued on for some time. Finally, the slope of the trail began to lessen and I could tell that we were about a couple of miles from the parking area. We were now back into the forested area, and with the greater darkness that surrounded us, the trail was nearly impossible to discern. A couple more hikers came walking past us with flashlights and went on their way. As they passed, I wished in my mind that we had a flashlight to make our way through this, the darkest part of the hike. As the last hiker got ahead of us about 30 yards, I noticed that his light stopped, and then he turned and walked back to us. He said that he would be happy to let us use his light, and that he would be able to make his way with the light of his partner. We were grateful to have it, and he went on his way. This good Samaritan was an answer to a prayer of the heart, and we continued on with the ability to truly see the trail for the first time since it had become dark.

Finally, just short of 11:00 PM, we could see silhouetted through the trees, the light of some headlights of a car in the parking area ahead about 100 yards. Though my family was not scheduled to be there, I instinctively knew that they would be, and I wanted to express the feelings of my heart to Brent before I saw my family and would have my attention turned to them. I started to weep again,
and told Brent how much this day had meant to me. He had been a guide of endless patience, and had shown the way up and down a great mountain that I could have never climbed by myself. I think Brent was caught off guard and did not expect the kind of feeling that I expressed. We hugged, patted each other on the back and I began to make my way over the last hundred yards. As we walked out of the tree’s and into the dirt parking area, a set of headlights came on pointed toward us. I recognized the car as my that of my daughter. Two of my daughters and my wife jumped from the car and came running. We embraced and all cried. Then I noticed an interesting thing. The blessing that had given me just enough strength, and taken away just enough pain so that I could continue, was now removed. I could not move another step. I was completely spent. We had been hiking for 17 and ½ hours. Lynette and the girls helped me to the car. They had brought ice water, and some sandwiches to give us strength. It was a glorious moment.

The drive home took forever. We stopped briefly back in Jackson at a convenience store where we could buy some chocolate milk, which we had both been craving. I slept for part of the drive as did Brent. We arrived at Brent’s home at about 2:00 AM and dropped him off. We drove to our home, and I took a quick shower to wash off the dirt and grime of the day, and to soak my body in the hot water. Before I slipped into bed, I knelt and expressed gratitude to Father for having this day of life, and for the gospel in my life.

It was now 3:00 AM. I had been going for over 24 hours straight. I slept deeply, and woke the next morning sore and yet as happy as I could be. It took me a while to regroup, but in the afternoon I sat my family down and went through the whole experience blow by blow. I told them that for the rest of their lives that when they would see the Teton peaks in the distance, they could tell their children that Grandpa Reed had been on top of the highest and biggest mountain of all. But I told them that they should add that the victory was not in climbing a mountain, but in being reminded of the lessons of life and the gospel.

LESSONS/METAPHORS FROM THE CLIMB

It is impossible to briefly share the lessons that came to me from this experience. Here are some of them.

A Need For a Guide

Brent Ashcraft played a role much more valuable than I had anticipated. His experience of having climbed this mountain several times, and having taken others to the top, all helped me greatly. I literally tried to step where he stepped, grab rocks where he grabbed, and to follow his pace. We have many guides in our lives that, if we are wise, we will follow. Christ is our ultimate guide. He asks us to “Come, follow Him.” He hopes we will trust him because he has “descended
below all things,” and will show us the way to stay on the straight and narrow path without faltering.

We also have other guides. Our beloved prophets and leaders in our stakes and wards. Serving as a bishop myself, I know firsthand of the personal flaws that each leader might have, yet I also am assured that these men serve under divine call.

At such dangerous and important moments as these, we must not be foolish enough to assume that we can do this on our own. If there is ever time for us to allow the Lord to “take us by the hand and guide us” it is now.

**Hitting the Wall and the Atonement**

One of the most valuable experiences of this adventure was to hit the wall physically and mentally. It forced me to place all I had remaining, my version of the widows mite, onto the alter to God. He then in turn, gave me what I needed to finish. He took my feeble offering, and then paid the price somehow to pack me to the finish line. I needed to be reminded as we all do, that the best of my efforts will never be enough to get back into God’s presence. It will take the Atoning power of the Savior! We all get to various crossroads in our life, and find that we can’t make it another step. Then, God will reach down to us from the heavens and give us blessings that give us just enough of what we need to get us through it. No more and no less.

Man has great mental and physical endurance and capacity, yet without God and the Atonement of His Son, we will fall short.

**What is Real**

At the summit of the Grand Teton, I was reminded again of what is real and what is not. The grand view from the top, the exhilaration of the victory of the climb, all were wonderful but in the grand scheme of things are not “real.” At the top of the mountain, I was reminded that one thing that is real is that there is truly a Father in Heaven. The priesthood blessings of the temple are real. The callings from God are real. There is within us a divine potential to become as God is and to create beauty. This is real. All the rest are mere mortal illusions.

**The Summit and the Parking Lot**

It occurred to me that reaching the summit was much like the day that I returned from my mission and was met at the Idaho Falls airport by all of my family. It was the peak of my life. I was tired, had put my whole heart and soul into it, and was coming home full of awe of the experience. Yet, I had little awareness that coming from the summit experience of my young life, would be followed by additional wonderful things, and also several very difficult and painful ones as well. I didn’t realize that climbing down from the summit of my mission
would be tougher than I had ever imagined.

Coming into the parking lot that night reminded me of what I think it will be like to pass through the veil into the next life. There we will be met by loved ones and friends. We will have barely been able to endure the last moments of life, and yet God will empower us with just enough strength to make it home. Our joy will be great, and yet we will rejoice not in our own capacity to have made it through life, but will rejoice in the grace of God to have helped us make it when we surely would have never been able to do so on our own.

**The Smile of the Mountain**

A lesson I learned on that day, is that man is truly puny compared to these great mountains. No matter how much I think that I climbed the mountain, I learned that the mountain let me up on that day. It was as though the mountain smiled at me and said, “Let him pass.” We are weak in comparison to the great forces of nature that God has placed upon this earth. At times we beat upon our chests and claim superiority to it all as we stand atop mountains. Yet, in reality, the mountain must smile upon us on that day, or we will never set foot on the summit. We are at the mercy of God and his world, and can be taken away or allowed to pass with just a nod of his head.

**SUMMARY**

I am grateful to be alive and to know that God is real, and that he was by my side on that day. I am grateful for my family and for the blessings of the gospel. I am grateful for the aid of a friend on this side of the veil to guide and help me, and for the unseen friends on the other side of the veil who stood by my side guiding the placement of my hands and feet. This was a day that shall forever be a glimmering diamond to me.