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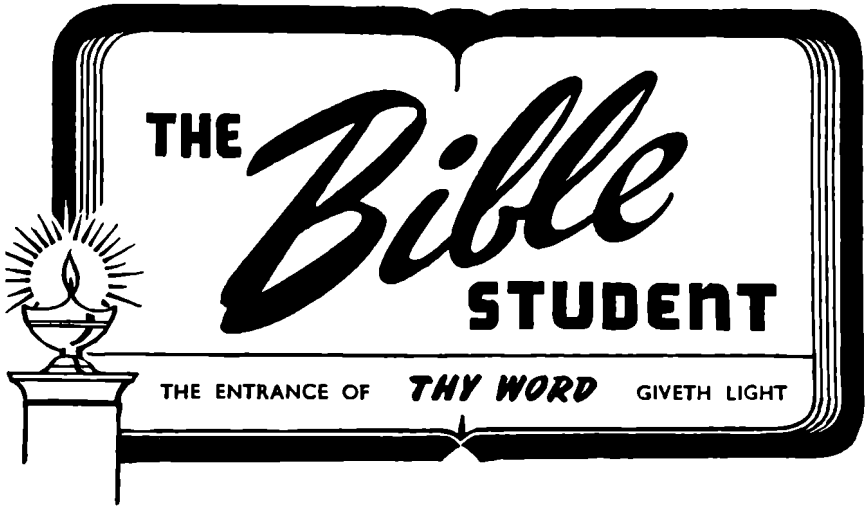
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THE STORY OF HIGH ALTITUDES

The story of high altitudes is the story of thrilling achievement. Mount Everest is only one, though the greatest, of numbers of lofty summits that have appealed to the heroic in men of all ages. Every country of high mountains has its store of stirring deeds and daring feats. I listened to a Swiss friend once, describing his several adventures on the Swiss Alps; and even as he recounted his stories his whole being seemed to thrill at the thought.

The story is not confined to mountain climbing, however. Equally fascinating is the story of men who have reached up to high altitudes in other spheres: many of them in the pure service of Truth and Right.

Every such romance of achievement is full of the great lessons of life. They are as wholesome and salutary in their influence as they are worthy of the closest study. They call forth the noblest faculties of chivalry, of faith, of courage, of endurance, of emulation: whilst others will sound a more solemn, yet equally wholesome, note of warning.

Whilst this is true of any one of the higher realms of human enterprise, we have a particularly wide, and in most respects unique, field to glean from in the moral and spiritual. Here are found lessons which take us beyond and above those offered elsewhere. This is as we should expect. The high altitudes of the spiritual life soar higher than any other. Whatever is purest and truest and best in other realms is found here. These heights possess characteristics all their own. They appeal more strongly to that which is best and worthiest in us all. It is to these we turn when we wish to urge upon young men and women the inspiration of high ideals, and the pursuit of an ennobling purpose in life:

‘And the high soul climbs the highway,
And the low soul gropes the low.’

Yes, it is the mark of the high soul to be attracted by such altitudes. To such the appeal is irresistible—climb they must, be the summit ever so hid in the far away azure blue, unreach-

able. There is progress in no other direction. 'Is it not the essential condition of all progress the pursuit of an ideal toward which one ever tends and yet can never reach?', were the words of M. de Nelidoff in his Presidential Address at the opening of the International Peace Conference of 1907 (if I mistake not the first Conference of its kind).

In all essentials that is true for the spiritual life also. And those who refuse the adventure of high altitudes refuse the path of real progress. 'The path of the just' (and we are not 'just' indolently or indifferently, but *determinedly*), says the Wise Man of Proverbs, 'is as the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day'—as the sun, rising higher each degree, reaches the noonday.

John Oxenham describes the alternatives:

'And the low soul gropes the low:
And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.'

Each line here is pregnant, for the whole implies *choice*—to climb, to grope, to drift—

'But to every man there openeth
A high way and a low,
And every man decideth
The way his soul shall go.'

It is of the very quality of the spiritual that such choice is not easy. We might go further and say that, even to the high soul the choice is not easy, however inviting. It is not easy just because the heights seem so inaccessible and enveloped, whilst the lowlands are at hand and attractive. They also have an enticing appeal to make.

Again, it is not easy because their true character seems veiled—instead of a leap upwards from crag to crag it seems rather a painful stumbling among rocks and briars. The peaks recede as we approach: As soon as one is attained a yet higher one appears above.

In spite of all, however, the high soul is assured that the path does lead onwards and upwards. Take Moses, for example: 'He chose (after having refused the alternative) rather to suffer affliction . . . esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches . . . He endured as seeing Him who is Invisible,' Who, like a true Guide, went ahead to point the way and fill his vision, and 'receive him into glory.' That is the blazed trail the heroes followed before him, and he had eyes to see what it is given to faith alone to see and attain.

But as you climb these altitudes remember there are dangers. Abraham, Moses, David—they all proved this. The saints have always proved it. To some natures the way seems all danger and nothing else. They reach upward to each succeeding summit with trembling knees and fearful countenance. Thank God they are still heroes, however; for they labour doubly and yet keep on in spite. But to others of more ardent self-confidence there are seemingly no dangers. With unchastened assurance born more of egotism than of faith no pinnacle seems beyond reach.

Of course both are mistaken, and both are liable to suffer defeat. In the one case the danger of dangers is to stop just short of victory, unconscious that it is within grasp. The eyes are blinded perhaps, or courage at last gives out. This is a very real danger, and the inner secret of overcoming it successfully to the very end is contained in the words already quoted: Moses '*endured as seeing Him who is Invisible.*' is the Law of Climbing—*fix the gaze on the Heights above, not on the depths below!*

The supreme danger on the other hand is pride of spiritual attainment, and overweening confidence. This is tragically illustrated in the story of King Josiah. You will not find it in the Book of Kings which is written from the purely historical side, but in the Books of Chronicles giving the incident as viewed from the Godward standpoint. Josiah began to climb at an early age, and with ardent zeal for God. With increasing momentum and thoroughness he swept before him like a whirlwind the accumulated putridity of the previous

reigns—he purged society, he revived religion, he restored the law, and then stood looking round from his dizzy height for fresh heights to conquer. It is an inspiring picture of youth, valour and religious zeal combining to crown him with the treasures of conquest. His people worshipped him—he was their last hope in a hopeless future, their only saviour from the yawning depths just ahead. He had reached high altitudes in more ways than one.

But ‘the archers shot at the king’, and pride laid him low—he lost both the voice of God and the vision of God, and he died prematurely (2 Chron. 35: 22, 25). With him ‘the last gleam of the sunset of Judah faded into night’. Jeremiah was so profoundly moved at the heroic and yet misplaced confidence that he wove into the history of the nation his lamentation as ‘an ordinance in Israel’. Even Zechariah takes up the dirge as a simile, and prophecies of the penitential mourning of Israel over their Messiah to be like ‘the mourning of Haddrimmon in the valley of Megiddon’ (Zech. 12: 11).

But though he fell he was born of such stuff as heroes are made of, and he left behind him a blessing where previously there was a curse. It shall be counted to him for righteousness.

Such and much more is the story of ‘High Altitudes’—moral and spiritual.

*And yet, tell me, O my soul, is it not nobler, like Peter—
To climb and fall,
and rise again—
Than never to climb at all—at all?*

A.McD.R.

Make us Thy mountaineers;
We would not linger on the lower slope,
Fill us with hope, O God of Hope,
That, undefeated, we may climb the hill
As seeing Him who is invisible.

Let us die climbing. When this little while
Lies far behind us, and the last defile
Is all aught, and in that light we see
Our Leader and our Lord—what will that be?

(AMY WILSON CARMICHAEL
of Dohnavur, India)