

*“We’ll travel over  
mountains so high. We’ll go  
through valleys below.*

*Still through it all we’ll find  
that this is the  
greatest journey that  
the human heart  
will ever see.*

*The love of God will  
take us far beyond our  
wildest dreams.”*

*Steven Curtis Chapman*

## Chapter 1

# cLiffHANGER

My arms were rapidly approaching the point of muscle failure. Fingers started to shake and my legs were beginning to pump up and down like a couple of pistons. Two hundred feet up in the air, hanging on to the side of a cliff, I was wondering why I had ever gotten into rock climbing in the first place!

The taste of adventure is always wet on my tongue and my wondering mind pushes itself to new heights, challenging my fears. My mother once made me promise that I would never do anything stupid. Clearly this was a major violation of that promise.

Pukansan National Park sprawls across a northeastern part of South Korea, less than an hour from the city of Seoul. Hiking through these majestic mounds of jagged rock and soil every weekend for the previous year had become a key component in maintaining my sanity. As a teacher in the heart of this megalopolis of eleven million people, the mountains had become my sanctuary, a rugged retreat from the fast-paced city life. The crisp air and beautiful scenery provided a stark contrast to the city smog and crowded subways.

Winding my way along the steep dirt trails, I frequently passed by an imposing 400-foot rock cliff in the center of the park. Its sheer granite face fascinated me, and using broken Korean, I discovered from the locals that it was known as Manjangbong. As a novice climber, I had often flirted with the idea of attempting to scale it—however, common sense always won out. Well, it almost always won out.

## 2 - *ONE GRIP HIGHER*

Other foreigners, who were also residing in Seoul, would frequently accompany me. They would inevitably talk me out of my illusions of rock climbing grandeur each time. One particular spring afternoon I was hiking alone. The moment my feet hit the trail at the bottom of the mountain, my mind raced thirty minutes ahead to the foot of Manjangbong. The magnificent edifice was drawing me with every step that pounded against the damp earth. It was as if I could hear it taunting and daring me to take up its formidable challenge. My eyes hardly looked up as the trail passed the base of the cliff. Having already mapped out the first fifty feet of the climb in my head, I sat down and laced up my climbing shoes. Tightening the straps on my backpack, my hands took hold of the rock and the scampering began.

The small stone at the bottom, engraved with the name of another ambitious person who had not reached the top, deserved more of my attention. A gold belt buckle rested on this miniature tombstone as a token of remembrance, but I was too full of imbecilic bravery to pay attention to this warning.

After one hundred feet of climbing up a relatively simple ladder type crag, I was feeling good. The crag slowly narrowed and forced me to continue working my way up a narrower, less inviting crack. The top seemed a lot farther away than it should have been. A slight twinge of nervous fear crept its way, uninvited, into my mind. Digging my fingers into the rock, I kept moving up.

Somewhere around half way to the top my muscles began to quiver and it became clear there was going to be trouble. The next handhold appeared very small and was about two feet higher than my reach. Two hundred feet in the air, unable to go any higher, I was going to be forced to swallow my pride, descend and admit that Manjangbong had defeated me.

Resting my forehead against the rock and peering between my legs, I had to figure out how to reverse my movement in order to work my way back down. Like a dog with its tail between its legs, cowering in retreat from a much larger dog, my ego had been severely bruised. There was only one problem—climbing down is significantly more difficult than climbing up. As my eyes and hands scoured the rock, I could not find the hold that had been there moments earlier. Two or three minutes of frantic searching ended to no avail. As any brave man would do in a dire situation of such magnitude, I began to pray! I prayed like never before. Between the shaking and sweating, there were a lot of promises made that afternoon.

I am sure you've done that before! We always pray the hardest when our life is on the line, don't we? Why is it that we don't log serious time on our knees until after we mess up? If we would pray all along and be adequately prepared, we would most likely never get into these situations in the first place. I have been stuck on the side of so many spiritual cliffs, with no clue as to how to get to the top, or even get safely down from them. That afternoon in South Korea taught me several very valuable lessons.

First of all, going it alone is never a good idea. We need friends to talk us out of stupid ideas, or get us out of difficult situations. Also, in life, as in rock climbing, sometimes things are out of our control. It is then that we become aware of our dependencies, and when we realize that, prayer is our only option.

Another lesson to be learned from rock climbing is that youthful ambition is often not trustworthy, and is never a substitute for wisdom and sound instruction. And finally, when we face mountains in life, we desperately need Divine assistance in overcoming them. Many things we face in life we simply cannot do on our own.

The letters to Timothy were written to a young man from his mentor as an instruction manual on the Christian

#### *4 - ONE GRIP HIGHER*

life. Having poured over these books many times during the past few years, I have gleaned from them much wisdom and sound instruction. Frequently, I found myself thinking that Paul must have had me in mind as he wrote.

Timothy was not much different from the rest of us. He was a man who was trying to live and serve the LORD with all his heart. He clearly had his share of mountains. Paul devoted two in-depth letters to counsel him in his pursuit of Christ. These books cry out to be studied by each and every young man who desires to live the Christian life to the fullest. Paul had discovered the answers in the person of Jesus Christ, and was attempting to relay those answers to Timothy, as well as to us.

Reading through Paul's correspondence to Timothy, I found that my heart has been burdened to explore how his ideas can be applied today. The world we live in is markedly different from the one in which Timothy lived. However, truth is eternal, transcending time and culture. In the following pages, I have tried to dig into a handful of these truths in an attempt to relate them to the world in which we live. We will, however, merely skim the surface of what Paul was trying to convey. It is my hope that in the following chapters we will glean a deeper understanding of the basic truths involved in living a life of godliness and excellence.

It is not my intention to offer the answers to life's struggles; my own spiritual journey is far from complete. However, my hope is to raise questions that will allow us to discover what God desires and to develop a more intimate relationship with Him.

Although I am not the most qualified to write this book, as I struggle daily with my own shortcomings, I am a young man deeply in love with my Savior. My desire is to venture deeper into love with God through this exploration of some of the wisdom of the apostle Paul.

It is my prayer that the subsequent pages will drive you further into the Word of God and into a more intimate relationship with the Almighty God, with a deeper understanding of His love and will for your life.

Well, the LORD heard my prayers that day on the side of Manjangbong. My body was being held together by sheer determination (and definitely Divine intervention). One last time my hand reached down. My arms were stretched to their full six-foot span, and then a little bit more. Somehow, by the grace of God, my fingers fell into a hollow in the rock. Shifting my weight to my right hand, I slowly lowered my body down. A short while later, with my feet firmly planted on the ground, my soul was praising God as it had never praised before. My knees, face and arms were scraped up pretty bad, and my legs could hardly bear the weight of my body as I stumbled down the trail. My heart was still slamming into my ribs as I boarded the bus for home. I had made it! I had lost in the struggle with the mountain, but I had won some very valuable spiritual lessons. Let the adventure begin...

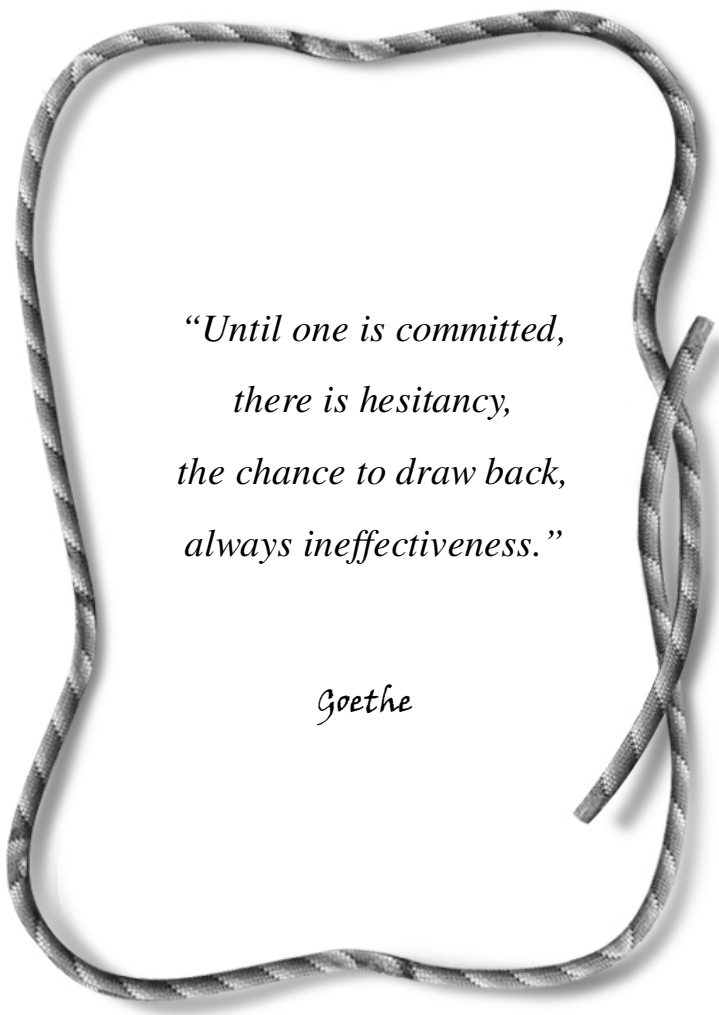
### *Going Higher...*

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you simply could not proceed? How did you deal with it?
  
2. What is the most adventurous thing you have ever done? Can you think of any parallels between your adventures and your spiritual journey?

6 - *ONE GRIP HIGHER*

3. What spiritual cliffs have you been on in the past few years? How did you deal with them?
  
4. Are there any cliffs in your life right now? List them.
  
5. Describe your relationship with God.





*“Until one is committed,  
there is hesitancy,  
the chance to draw back,  
always ineffectiveness.”*

*Goethe*

## Chapter 2

# Commitment

The loud speaker announced that there were 30,000 people in the stadium that cloudy spring day. It was the second day of the 2000 PENN Relays, the largest annual track and field meet in the United States. Having qualified to compete in the pole-vault for the college division, I carried my long bag of poles out to the center of the field and laid them next to the crash mat near the vaulting runway.

With nervous excitement, my mind was consumed with my usual warm-up routine. Granted, only a handful of the 60,000 eyes even noticed me at this point, nevertheless my eyes had never seen even close to this many people at a college meet before. Years of training and preparation had gotten me this far and today was going to be a day to remember. Blood was flying through each blood vessel and I was pumped and ready for the competition.

My plan was to break the Binghamton University school record of 16 feet 4 inches. Having successfully made this height in practice several times earlier in the month, I was confident that the added adrenaline provided by a crowded stadium would be enough to help me achieve this goal.

Now, for anyone who has never tried pole-vaulting, a few points of explanation must be added. The basic strategy is this: holding a 16-foot long fiberglass pole, the vaulter runs as fast as he can towards a bar that is set between 14 and 17 feet in the air (the professionals jump nearly 20 feet). As he approaches the bar, the pole is lowered and planted firmly in a hole in the ground called "the box." At this point the athlete's arms are extended upward and in a single, swift motion he jumps towards the bar, swinging his

## *10 - ONE GRIP HIGHER*

feet in front of his body and up over his head. If this is all done correctly, the pole will bend nearly in half and launch the vaulter, feet first, up into the air. The desired result is successful clearance over the bar, and a safe landing in the large crash mats on the other side.

The key to all of this is committing one hundred percent to the entire process. You have to run and jump with every mite of your energy and strength in order to be successful and safe. Failure to fully commit can be dangerous. Every beginner has his share of injurious wipeouts.

I remember skiing one winter with my father and he warned me that the better you are at skiing the harder you wipeout. That insight applies to the vault as well. However, the potential risk is far outweighed by the rush one feels as he is propelled through the air in defiance of the law of gravity. For a few moments it actually feels as though you are flying.

The competition got underway and was going well. Everything was feeling really good, and I sailed high over the first several heights with relative ease. The crowd seemed to be paying more attention to the vaulting, and each successive clearance was greeted with scattered applause from the handful of spectators who were not focused on the running events of the track.

The moment of truth had finally arrived. Having cleared 16'4", I was the last competitor remaining in the event, and the officials raised the bar to a height of 16'9". To clear it would not only mean setting a school record, but also setting a new meet record for my category. My coach, Mike Thompson, offered last minute advice. He always said the same thing in situations like this, and for the rest of my life I will never forget his words: "You can do it, Jason! Run hard and COMMIT!"

Checking my starting mark, I began to focus on the bar. It loomed down the runway like a giant barrier to be conquered. Absorbed with confidence that clearance and

success would soon be in hand, my mind began visualizing the jump. With a few deep breaths I was off and running, the pole was raised high in the air, and my speed built up with every stride. As I approached the bar and hit full speed, I lowered the pole towards the box.

And then it happened. Out of nowhere a seed of corrosive doubt stole into my mind, completely uninvited! The recesses of my brain began to question the possibility of actually clearing this height. Viciously attempting to fight it off, but to no avail, at the last moment something was held back. I failed to fully commit to the jump.

The pole was already buried in the back of the box and I jumped up half-heartedly, only because there was so much momentum that it was too late to bail out. As it bent, the power generated in the fiberglass pole was too much for my arms to handle. It flew out of my grip, the friction burning my hands and tearing the skin from my fingers. The uncoiling pole slammed against the center of my body.

A collective gasp silenced the crowd. Everyone was paying full and undivided attention now! My speed carried me under the bar and onto the mat. I was writhing in agony! Unable to generate the energy to get up, the officials slowly approached the mat in a state of disbelief. One leaned down and whispered to me, "Son, do you need me to get an ambulance?" Politely refusing through clenched teeth, I managed to get up.

Another official informed me that I could attempt the jump two more times. Yeah, like that was going to happen! The experience was so unnerving that even after the pain had subsided, my mind was unwilling to muster the confidence to do it again. They say everyone has their fifteen minutes of fame; well, that was mine!

That was not the end of my pole-vaulting, but it was the most significant moment of my track and field career and the experience is forever riveted in my mind as a result of the lessons learned that day.

## *12 - ONE GRIP HIGHER*

Pole-vaulting is quite similar to our spiritual lives in many respects. When we fail to commit there are some serious repercussions. The consequences when we fail to commit wholeheartedly in life are usually more severe than any physical pain experienced in life. The result of partial or no commitment in our spiritual walk is devastating. Goethe is attributed with the remark, "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness."

Early in his first letter to Timothy, Paul urges Timothy to fully commit to a life of faith: "I give you this instruction... so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to the faith and a good conscience" (1 Timothy 1:18-19<sup>1</sup>).

Notice how Paul says that we are to take care of our faith. He is not passively implying that we ought to do this. He uses two very active verb phrases in his exhortation. The first is that we are to "fight the good fight." The image that would have come to the mind of a New Testament Christian, most likely, would have been that of a warrior or soldier, one who defends what is his and attacks the enemy, utilizing all of his ability to insure victory.

In our modern world, we think about the Marines or the Navy Seals. These guys do the dirty work to insure that every mission is a success, and they hold nothing back. Even when they are not at war, these men guard, defend and ready themselves for whatever threat might rear its ugly head.

This same fervor is to be applied to our daily walk with Christ. In fact Paul wrote specifically about the need to prepare and commit to whatever it takes to achieve victory in the struggles that will come:

"Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the