BOOKS I HAVE READ: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS

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A little booklet that is a must read for those thinking about mountains, the outdoors and spirituality.
Category: Reviews

Those who know me well are aware that I have loved mountains and the outdoors all of my life. I am at my happiest out on the hills, whether this is walking with Sue or running along a mountain ridge with only the wind and the sheep for company. The desire for hard physical exercise is even more important as I go through a period of depression: I wrote a piece a while ago which tries to get to grips with the issue.

As a Christian, I am instinctively drawn to enjoy and appreciate the world that my Heavenly Father has created for us. However, I'm also somewhat sceptical of some of the "you are closer to God on a mountain than anywhere else" rhetoric that you hear in some circles. With all this in mind, I am very grateful to my friend Richard Tiplady who has recently published a booklet which "aims to give a Christian take on the mountains".

Before I continue; just one brief *caveat*. The title of the booklet "Following Jesus in the Great Outdoors" is slightly misleading; the subtitle "Learning about discipleship from the mountains" is much more accurate. People experience the outdoors in many different ways, not just by climbing mountains. However, in a short booklet, you can't cover everything, so this is a minor complaint and much of what Richard has to say can be contextualised to other outdoor pursuits.

The booklet has five chapters; with the introductory one setting the scene.

> *It is something of a commonplace to refer to four different kinds of separation occurring in the biblical narratives as a consequence of the actions of Adam and Eve. We are used to identifying the separation from God shown in their hiding from him (Gen 3.8-10) and their expulsion from Eden (Gen 3.23f). But we can also see this brokenness expressed as separation from others: in Adam's blame-shifting in the woman you put here with me' (Gen 3.12); in the gender conflicts implied by 'your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you' (Gen 3.16); in Cain's fratricidal act of murder (Gen 4.8); as separation from our environment in the painful toil of agricultural labour replacing the easy gathering of the gifts from the garden (Gen 3.17-19); and even as separation from our very selves.*
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> *p.4*

This fourfold separation from God, from each other, from creation and from ourselves forms the substance of the following chapters - though not quite in this order.

Reconciliation with Oneself. The second chapter considers the way in which spending time in the mountains helps us to come to terms with ourselves. Mountaineering involves mind and body working together in a way which which helps us to be fully absorbed in a task and to lose track of time, our fears and our worries. The booklet gives a few examples of people who have found help to overcome physical or mental health pressures through spending time in the hills.

> *The link between poor health, poor nutrition, and inactivity is widely accepted. There is further evidence that our bodies suffer because we are no longer subjected to the hardships of an outdoor adventure lifestyle. Outdoor adventure has been described as 'a variety of self-initiated activities and experiences, usually utilizing a close interaction with the natural environment, that contains elements of real or apparent risk, in which the outcome is uncertain but can be influenced by participant or circumstance... Unique aspects of adventure activities, such as discomfort and physical challenge, cannot be replicated by other activities (such as traditional sports) and are directly linked to improved well-being.*
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> *p. 7*

When Richard writes about "risk" he knows the subject better than most. Though I've not had Richard's experiences (thankfully), I do recognise the way in which hardship and difficulty brings a degree of healing and wholeness.

Falling face first into a bog did not blunt my happiness one bit.

Reconciliation with God. The thing about spending time in the mountains is that it helps you to see yourself in a broader perspective. You are small and you are not fully in control of your destiny. Richard points out that mountains and the wilderness play a key role in much of the biblical narrative and that early Christian spirituality was shaped by wild places.

Scripture paints a picture of an awesome God, who holds the universe in his hands and yet who counts every hair on our heads: a God who is loving and knowable, yet who is also beyond our comprehension.

> *This tension--or balance has been summarized as the via positiva and the via negativa. The via positiva or the way of affirmation tells us of the things we can say about God. That he is loving. That he is caring. That he is Lord, creator, saviour. We use our creativity and our*

> *imagination to try and find ways of expressing God's all-encompassing glory. In contrast, the via negativa, or the way of negation, reminds us that there is much that we cannot know or say about God. There are things that have been revealed to us about God, but there are secret things that belong to God alone (Deut 29.29). Along with Isaiah, we affirm that God is a God who hides himself (Isa 45.15). Barren and unnerving landscapes, like the Scottish Cairngorms when the weather has closed in, or the Cuillin on Skye in any conditions, teach us about our fragility and the value of silence. The Desert Fathers and Mothers, as early as the third and fourth centuries AD, ventured into the desert landscapes of Egypt, Sinai and Syria, and in those silent places they developed a spirituality of silence and solitude. This involved prayer that moved beyond all words and even thoughts, into a deep and silent resting in God.Â*
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> *p. 12*

This chapter is the longest in the booklet and develops these thoughts in some detail. However, it ends with these two short paragraphs, which are - to me - the key part of the book.

> *Can we not, therefore, look at creation as a way of initiating us into a sense of the deep generosity of God? For the very continuity of creation is itself a sign of God's grace and mercy and therefore a starting point for a relationship with God. Note, however, that I call it 'a starting point.' We can say that the experience of God in the gift of creation is real, but we can also say that it is insufficient. Because the biblical prayers mentioned above might begin with creation, but they do not stop there. Those prayers are looking for the fulfilment of the promises of God. Creation is an anticipation of the future. It is not the future. There is more to come.*
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> *In short, it is possible to have a real encounter with the grace and generosity of God in his creation. We can say that this encounter is real, but we should also acknowledge that it is insufficient. Because it needs to point us somehow (and creation) to our intended maturity.*
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> *p. 15, 16*

A longer or more theologically orientated treatment might have dipped into the concepts of common and saving grace at this point, but the point is made. We can and should look to the hills, but our help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

Reconciliation with Others. Mountaineering may seem to be the ultimate solo-sport, but it is by its nature communal. There is a large community of people who give their time to train and guide people to climb, walk and run in bumpy places. Community develops out of shared hardships and a shared love of the outdoors. Some of the most profound conversations that I've had about my life and faith have occurred on ultra-marathons where I have buddied-up with another runner to jog and walk together for twenty miles or more, often through the night.

> *One of the most visible, far-reaching and mutual aid important aspects of this culture of can be seen in the mountain rescue teams that exist across England, Wales and Scotland. There are over 70 such teams, staffed by volunteers and funded by charitable donations. They strongly resist any attempts to introduce government funding or accident insurance for their operations; they see themselves as the mountaineering community helping other mountaineers. As Debora Halbert comments, Mutual aid, self-organization without the force or power of the state, and the power of the gift creates a far more interesting and longstanding cultural commons. These are values worth climbing for.'*
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> *p.19*

Reconciliation with the Environment. Humanity is increasingly distanced from our created environment. Our urban, industrial lifestyles take us away from creation, while at the same time causing (possibly irreparable) harm to it.

Spending time in the mountains can help us to get a sense of how humans can and should interact with the world that we share and should help us to grow in our concern for creation. It is no accident that many mountaineers and runners become environmental activists.

The book closes with these words:

> *... we have looked at ways in which the mountains can inform our discipleship and offer foretastes of the healing and salvation that is begun with and will be completed in Jesus Christ, but which we can experience in part, however fragmentary, in this life.*
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> *p. 25*

This short booklet will set you back less than four quid from Grove Books and is worth every penny. I would encourage any Christian who loves the outdoors to give it a read. Equally, if you are not a Christian, but the outdoors give you a sense of transcendence and wonder, it would be worth giving it a go as it might help to draw those threads together for you.

Richard recently gave a lecture along the theme of this booklet. It is well worth watching, but it is only available till the end of 2022, so you have 18 days!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOIcBqFo-jo