



TRAIL THOUGHTS

Stories for hiking, camping, and backpacking

15) The Ultimate Beauty

One day, I stopped by a library book sale, and I stumbled upon a table of books that changed my life. It was the travel and hiking section. On the table were stacks of books displaying mountains so beautiful that my mouth began to water, waterfalls so high I was getting dizzy just looking at them, and myriads of wild scenes that made my heart race like a kid anticipating Christmas.

One book in particular became the center of my fascination for months to come and the start of a new adventure. It was a small book with grainy, out-of-focus, black-and-white pictures, and there were even a few pages missing from the old copy. It certainly was not something that would immediately inspire a months-long fascination.

It was a guide to Glacier National Parks, and its battered pages contained photos of some of the most beautiful mountains I had ever set eyes on. The minute I opened the book, I was hooked. I knew that I simply had to go see those mountains in real life. They were just too beautiful to pass by.

The beauty I uncovered in that little book was the beginning of an annual adventure to the Rocky Mountains that would take my dad and I to some of the most beautiful and scenic places we've ever been.

I think sometimes God is waiting for us to find out how beautiful he is. He wants to become our fascination, our obsession.

As beautiful as creation is, the creator and maker of all that beauty must be simply beyond words. What if our eyes were opened to see him clearly? What if we chose to live by faith and not by sight? What if we became fascinated with God and pursued him as the greatest beauty the world has ever witnessed? What if God became our addiction?

Read Revelation 5, a picture of all creation completely fascinated by the Lamb (Jesus). What would your life look like if you were as excited about Jesus as you are about games?

Introduction

I love the outdoors. On my days off, I'll often head to the river with my kayak or to a state park for some hiking.

It seems that in these wilder, lonelier places, I find God more easily. Away from the everyday distractions, I hear his voice.

It's no wonder that Jesus would often sneak off by himself to spend time alone with his Father.

Luke 15:16 - "But Jesus would often go to someplace where he could be alone and pray."

This small booklet contains some of the topics I have thought about while camping, hiking, or sitting alone in the wilderness. The stories are in no particular order, and you can just as easily start at the beginning as at any random page.

My hope is that you would take this with you into the woods and read a page or two at a time, and that your heart would be drawn closer to the God who loves you so very much, especially when you can't even see it.

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1) Following God's Trail

As I've walked along a trail, I have often thought about Psalm 103:7. This verse reads, "He made Moses to know his ways, but he made the sons of Israel to know his deeds."

There are two ways of relating to God: knowing his *ways* or knowing his *deeds*; actually knowing God himself or just knowing *about* him.

The one way of knowing God is all about personal experience, actually having met him. The other way is completely impersonal; just hearing about him. Anyone can know about God; and, in reality, everyone does know about him to some extent. But only a few go so far as to actually know him.

To actually know God requires following after him, walking on the trail he is making.

To walk on God's trail, you gotta get up, put on your hiking boots, and just start hiking. You gotta get moving. If you're sitting still, you're not following a trail; you're enjoying the scenery.

To walk on God's trail means you're headed in a clear and certain direction. Wherever he is headed, that's your destination. You're not wandering around, and you're not led by whatever looks fun or exciting. No, you're headed down the path he's cleared, and all side trails are mere distractions.

To walk on God's trail is not a part-time adventure but a full-time, twenty-four-hours-a-day lifestyle. You have set your life in the center of his path, and your every decision is based on, first and foremost, the fact that you are following his trail.

Moses walked God's trail; Israel merely heard about it. What about you?

Read Exodus 24. How were God's instructions different for Moses than for Israel's leaders? Why did God want Moses to come on the mountain? Do you think he was scared?

14) What Does Survival Take?

I tend to pack way too much every time I go camping. Although I know this weakness, I end up doing it just about every time. I tend to think, "Well, what if I need it? It's not that heavy. It doesn't take up that much space. It sure would be nice to have it with me... just in case."

Before too long, my pack weighs twice as much as it really should, and I'm carrying things I'll never use or even remember that I brought along.

But what if I packed, every time, just the bare minimum? What if I knew exactly what I would need to survive, and only packed that? What if I got rid of all the things that make hiking more enjoyable, more exciting, more memorable, more safe and instead packed just enough to keep me from dying?

What would I need, then?

People say we need three things for survival: food, water, and shelter. But Jesus showed us we really only need one thing: a relationship with the Father through him.

Food? He is the bread of life (John 6:48-51).

Water? He is the living water (John 4:13-14).

Shelter? We live in him (John 15:1-11).

So, really, we only need Jesus. If we've got him, he takes care of all the rest.

I can't tell you enough how true this is. When we choose to put God in first place, he really does take care of everything else. Maybe it's time we quit trying so hard to get more and better things and instead focus on knowing God, walking with him.

Read Matthew 6:25-34. Is there a difference between worrying about the future and planning for it? What has first place in your life: knowing Jesus or making life more fun?

13) Live the Adventure

Men were made for adventure, for risk, for danger. This is why we love to play games like Halo and Call of Duty, why we love airsoft and paintball, why we love the wilderness.

We were not designed for safety and comfort but for going into danger back-to-back with God.

At one time, I led a group of boys on a trip to the Black River State Forest, to the Smrekar trail system. We planned to hike five miles from our car to a small pond in the middle of the woods. The first part would be along easy-to-follow but rough trails. The last mile, we planned to head off-trail to the pond.

It took us almost as long to complete that last mile as it had to do the first five. We trudged through pine trees so tightly-packed that to get through them we used our hiking sticks as machetes. We slogged through ferns so high they reached almost to our eyes and made navigation interesting to say the least. Lastly came the mosquito-infested marsh that sucked our boots into its grip.

It was tiring. It was risky. It was even at times scary. But it was adventure, and we loved every minute of it.

When we finally found our bit of dry ground in the midst of the marsh, it was like a spot of heaven on earth. We had conquered the wilderness, tramped our way through it and come out on the other side victorious.

We were adventurers no less than Livingston or Columbus.

It didn't matter that we found an unmarked road only a hundred yards from us. It didn't matter because we relished the adventure that had brought us to our campsite. Let others take the road; we had hiked through the wild.

Read Genesis 11:31-12:7. What adventure did God call Abram on? Would it be difficult to leave your family to go live somewhere else? Do you think Abram was scared?

2) I Feel Lost

I often feel lost when hiking. I like to have constant assurance that I'm on the right trail. I want a trail marker, map, or GPS to tell me every thirty seconds or so that, yes, I'm on the right trail. (This probably comes from my "ten miles in the wrong direction" hike, but you can read about that on another page.)

If I'm in an unfamiliar area with few or no trail signs, I tend to second-guess myself and constantly check my map to see if I really am on the correct trail.

But I've learned a few things.

Rule #1: If you started on the right trail and you're on a trail now, then you're probably on the correct trail, whether you feel it or not, whether it goes the way you think it should or not.

Rule #2: If you're no longer on a trail but walking through the woods, you probably are now or soon will be lost.

Rule #3: You can always turn around to someplace familiar.

Rule #4: Every trail leads somewhere, even if it's to a dead end.

In life, you will sometimes ask yourself, "Geez, am I really doing what God wants me to do? Am I following him? Or have I taken a wrong turn somewhere, missed what he wanted me to do?" God will not give you constant signs indicating you're on the right trail because he wants you to trust him.

So learn to trust him. Learn to trust that he's big enough and smart enough to get your attention. If you're following the last instructions God gave you, don't worry about what the trail looks like. Just keep going, and it'll make sense in the end. At the very worst, you'll end up having to backtrack a bit.

Read Psalm 107:1-15. In what ways does the poet describe people feeling lost? Have you ever wondered if you're doing what God wants? How often do you ask him to lead you?

3) Know Where You Are

My first solo backpacking trip was to the Theodore Roosevelt National Park, a desolate, little-visited park in the middle of nowhere that has somehow captured my heart. It was here that I first learned how important it is to stay oriented.

The trails at the Theodore Roosevelt National Park, you see, are not maintained by thousands of hikers but by the fairly regular roaming of the buffalo herds. When I say “fairly regular,” I mean the buffalo sometimes take the same way and so create a path. And when I say “sometimes,” what I mean is “never.”

I would find myself hiking along what started as a well-marked trail only to have it suddenly disappear with no signs of its whereabouts. Or I’d be on one trail when suddenly a dozen other paths would all intersect at the same place with no one direction looking any more “correct” than another.

It was on this trip that my ability to keep track of my location was most put to the test. With map and compass, I would constantly check my surroundings so that, even when the trail disappeared, I knew basically where I was and how to get to where I wanted to be. If I somehow missed the trail, it was okay because I would find out fairly quickly.

Although those trails have since (and sadly) grown more well-worn, this truth remains: when hiking, know where you are.

The same is true spiritually. We need to know where we are.

Jesus has given us a “compass” of sorts to help us stay on the right path. Every so often, we need to stop, take a look at this compass, and check how our lives measure up. If things don’t add up, if we’re in the wrong place spiritually, then we simply tell God we’re sorry and ask his help to get back on track.

Read Matthew 22:36-40. Which two commands are the most important in the Bible? How are you doing with these two commands? Are they really first in your life?

12) Discipline of Quietness

In recent months, my favorite place to meet with God has been the sandbars of the lower Wisconsin River. The small amount of visitors on weekdays and the abundance of sandbars make for an easy and quick get-away that’s only a ten-minute drive from my house.

It’s a beautiful and scenic place, but it’s the silence and the solitude that draws me back time and again.

On a sandbar with nothing but my Bible and sometimes my guitar, there really isn’t much to do other than be quiet and listen to God. Although I love to explore, an empty sandbar really doesn’t offer that many distractions before there simply isn’t anything left to occupy my attention. (Oh, look! It’s another... pile of sand.)

It’s there, in the boredom, that I find myself asking the Holy Spirit, “Lord, what are you saying?”

And it’s then that I really start to listen with undivided attention.

These times alone with God have been like water to my thirsty soul and like fire to my cold heart. When I am thirsty and all I want is more of Jesus, they satisfy my longing; when I am cold and tired and just want to give up, they change my heart into a bonfire. I cannot say enough how vital they have become for maintaining my walk with Jesus.

I have learned to make times of quietness into a regular part of my devotion. I try to take one day each week for an extended time of silence and solitude, but even my regular day is marked by times of quieting my heart and listening to God.

I am beginning to learn the value of quieting myself and asking the Holy Spirit often, “Lord, what are you saying?”

Read 1 Kings 19:8-14. Why did Elijah go to the mountain? Do you think he ever had trouble hearing God? What things distract you from hearing God? How can you change that?

11) Trusting My Guide

An hour from my house is a wonderfully under-explored place known as Pop's Cave. The steep uphill trail, covered in slick mud and unsteady rocks, dissuades most visitors.

On one particular spring day, my friend Kerry was leading my youth group on a trip through the cave. It was exciting because only he knew where we were going. At one point in the cave, we came to the entrance to what everyone calls "the Mud Room." Why? You probably guessed already. It's muddy, very muddy.

As we stood on a ledge, I watched Kerry disappear into a hole that I swear was the size of a baseball.

"You're sure we can get through that?" I asked. I wasn't scared; I just didn't like the idea of getting stuck inside a cave.

"Yeah, it opens up after a bit," came the muffled reply from the owner of the feet I saw wiggling in the glow of my flashlight.

"Like how long? A few inches? Ten feet?"

"I don't know. Just come in. It's cool."

"Okay, if you're sure I can get out..." I said and lowered myself down, thinking, "I sure hope he's right."

As I approached the tunnel entrance, I realized it was actually not the size of a baseball. It was the size of a golf ball. A golf ball chopped in half and then crushed by a thousand-pound gorilla on steroids.

To make a long story short, I squeezed into the entrance and wormed my way into the mud room. It was a cool experience, and it was a good lesson in trusting my guide.

Read Mark 4:36-41. Why did the disciples worry? Why did Jesus think it was silly to be afraid? Why is it tough to trust Jesus? Will Jesus ever guide you to a bad place?

4) Blazing Your Own Trail

One of my favorite places to hike is Governor Dodge State Park. Just a 20-minute drive from my house and offering not only great hiking but also wonderful views, I've explored much of the park's trails over the past few years.

Because I know the park so well, I will often set off through the woods with at most a general idea of where I want to go. I know the trails, so if I get lost, I can always find my way back.

One off-trail trip I've made a number of times has been to head out from Twin Valley campground and walk north-east towards the bluffs. At the end is a cave and a number of very scenic overlooks.

The first time I attempted this, it was in the middle of the summer, and the thick vegetation meant I would only rarely see the cliffs marking my destination. No matter, though, I had seen them clearly from my starting point and had taken a reading there with my compass.

It probably would have helped if my compass actually pointed north. And it would have been nice to have a map with me.

Not exactly sure of where I was, which way I was headed, or even where I was going, I chose to keep walking, hoping to catch glimpses of the cliffs through the trees.

In the end, I saw enough glimpses to keep me going in the right direction, and I ended up blazing a new trail.

If following God is like walking along a trail, then most of the time, you'll be following a fairly clear path. There will come a time in your life, however, when the trail you're on will come to a stop, and God will ask you to begin blazing your own. It's in this uncertainty that you will learn what it means to trust.

Read Joshua 1:1-9, when God called Joshua to lead Israel. Do you think Joshua felt like he knew how to lead? Why did God say to "be courageous"? Why is trusting God tough?

5) I'm Sweaty, I'm Hungry, I'm Tired

A few years back, my dad and I began to plan for our first trip to Glacier National Park. We read the guidebooks, reserved the sites, bought our supplies, and started training. Then began the months of waiting, dreaming, and imagining the hike to come. Pouring (drooling) over the photos, we were worse than kids before Christmas.

Finally, July came and the months of dreaming and anticipating were coming to an end. We drove to Montana, and all our giddiness (yes, I did use the word "giddy") made the twenty-four hours pass by in no time at all.

All I could think about was how beautiful it was going to be when we made it to the mountains. No longer staring at black-and-white photos on a page, we would soon be seeing the mountains in real life. (Beat that, IMAX!)

What my dad and I weren't expecting was how difficult the trail was going to be.

Man, was it tough!

We went up and down and up and down and up and down... Mile after mile we hiked, and our packs seemed to be growing heavier by the minute. The trail seemed to go on and on as our legs just kept getting more tired.

Surrounded by the beautiful wildflowers and craggy, snow-capped mountains we had dreamed of, all we noticed was how sweaty, how hungry, and how tired we were.

God never promised he'd make things easy for us, but he did say he'd be with us wherever he would send us. Whether the trail is easy or difficult, he said he'll give us the strength we need. And if we take time to look, we'll see him all around us.

Read Matthew 28:18-20. What last commands does Jesus give? How does knowing God's with us help us to follow his instructions and not give up? Is God there when life's tough?

10) Only a Few Find Him

Camping is great. You get to relax in the outdoors, hang out around a campfire, and enjoy the company of good friends.

But then there's backpacking.

Backpacking is camping on a whole new level. There are no crowds. There are no roads. In fact, there are few signs of civilization at all.

I can still remember my first backpacking trip.

At Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, we spilled out of the car and muscled our packs to the trailhead. We were alone, and the sense of wildness was thick. All was quiet, anxiously quiet, during my dad's "don't mess with bears" speech.

I think God timed things perfectly just for me that day. After the first three miles of rolling trail, the path opened onto a view of Lake Superior that I'll never forget. We arrived just as the sun began to poke its head through the gray clouds, casting white rays out like diamonds. My eyes followed two birds lazily soaring back and forth in the breeze. Beneath it all lay the vast deep blue-green of Lake Superior.

To the left and the right, there was not another soul. We were the only ones enjoying this beautiful and wild place.

Jeremiah 29:13 reads, "You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart."

There are only a few people who will get to know God on a deep level because only a few are willing to actually look for him and to keep looking until they find him.

God wants you to find him. Will you look and keep looking?

Read Matthew 13:44-46. What is the kingdom of heaven like? How is heaven like a buried treasure or a pearl? What things would you have to give up in order to find more of God?

9) This Ain't a Solo Hike

I love to hike alone and often end up enjoying the wilderness by myself, but there is something simply awesome that happens when a group goes into the wild together.

The first backpacking trip I ever led was to the Kettle Moraine State Forest, to a section of the Ice Age Trail. The plan was to hike two miles to the first site, three miles to the next, and then follow the road back to the car.

Little did I know...

We ended up arriving three hours late and what looked like two miles on my maps (inaccurate maps I found online) was closer to five miles in reality. Suddenly our expected arrival time changed from "about an hour" to "I have no idea."

As the day wore on and the sun began to set, my team of boys (ranging from nine to fourteen years old) quickly began to tire. It was hot. There were billions of mosquitoes. We were running low on water. And the trail was unending...

To make matters worse, we were in thick forest and only had three flashlights between the eight of us.

It was at this time that I learned to love the value and the real fun of going through a tough situation with a group. As time sapped our strength, the boys began to act selflessly for the benefit of everyone else. Those with flashlights called out things like "Roots! Watch your step!" or "Poison ivy on the left!" Others offered to carry the smaller boys' packs. Still others kept the team going with rounds of The Ants' Marching Song.

Church, family, even friendships are meant to be like that hiking trip. You were designed to serve others, to enjoy helping people even to the point of it costing you something.

Read Matthew 14, a busy day in the life of Jesus. Do you think Jesus ever got tired of helping people? Why did he put others before himself? What can you do to show love to people?

6) Psalm 24:3

On a tough uphill climb, I have often thought about Psalm 24:3, "Who may climb the LORD's hill or stand in his holy temple?"

There are times in my life when trying to follow Jesus has seemed like hiking up a long hill on a hot day with a 50-pound pack on my back. All I want to do is quit, turn around, or at least sit right where I am and not move another inch.

Following God is tough. Sometimes, it takes all you've got, more than you've got.

But we're on a journey up "the LORD's hill" so we can "stand in his holy temple." Our path leads up, straight up. And our destination is nothing less than God's home.

The word "holy" means "totally separate, utterly different, otherworldly." It's no wonder we have a difficult time trying to follow God. The place we're going to is so vastly separated from us! We're climbing a hill, a hill to a different dimension.

Climbing the hill to God's home, you end up leaving things behind. You sweat out bad attitudes by the minute. You lose weights of unforgiveness. You even leave old friends who complain you're moving too fast, wasting your time, or just plain nuts for wanting to go higher. They say it can't be done. So you do it anyhow.

To get to the top of God's hill, to the place where he lives, it'll require that you get rid of anything and everything you know he doesn't like. It'll mean getting honest about your failures and owning up to the fact that you need God's help.

But there are few things more awesome than standing on top of a mountain and looking around. It's breathtaking and worth all the struggle. Oh, it is worth the cost!

Read Hebrews 12:12-22. How is Mt. Sinai different from Mt. Zion? How are they similar? Should you fear approaching God? What might you have to give up to get closer to God?

7) It's Just a Cruddy Weekend

I really do love some difficulties when I'm camping, but there's a point where it's just too much.

The first day of our trek through the Superior Hiking Trail in Minnesota, we slept in a swamp. Literally. It had been raining for the last two weeks, and our late arrival at Bear Lake meant all sites were taken already... except for The Swamp. Although I'd like to think someone was thoughtful enough to save the site for us, I'm sure the fact that it was empty had nothing to do with kindness. Rather, it was probably due to the fact that 90% of the site was under water, including the fire pit that held six inches of liquid.

And then there were the five miles of mud we slogged through the next day carrying our packs. For some reason, I had the funny notion that waterproof boots would keep water out.

But really, you had to laugh when it came time for the gale-force winds and surprise tornado the next night. I'm sure I would've laughed except I was too busy trying to finish cooking my rice while shivering under a pine tree that really offered no protection from the rain. Oh, and did I mention we were camping on a cliff at the time?

Between weather and trail conditions, that week was one of the worst trips I've ever led. But, y'know, it was just a week. Just one week. Then it was home to a hot shower and a dry bed.

Sometimes, life just sucks. Maybe your parents got divorced. Maybe your Dad yelled at you. Maybe your brother stole your wallet. Maybe you're failing math, your dog ran away, and your best friend is moving to Tennessee. Yeah, it's a country song.

But, in light of eternity, it's just a cruddy weekend. So hang in there. Smile 'cause Jesus loves you. Heaven's coming soon.

Read Hebrews 12:2-3. Do you think it was easy for Jesus to go to the cross? What would make it difficult? Have you ever felt like life just plain sucks? How can you hang in there?

8) The Big Wrong Turn

Early spring one year, I headed to Devil's Lake State Park to attempt a portion of the Ice Age Trail that I had recently heard about: a ten-mile hike to Parfrey's Glen State Natural Area, a scenic river gorge nestled in the wooded hillsides.

Ten miles there, ten miles back. With a pack holding my lunch, a Bible, and two quarts of water, I decided to make the attempt.

I probably would have made it and never had a great story to tell if I hadn't somehow gotten on the wrong trail. Still, it would have been a much more boring experience if I hadn't used up all my water early in the day, expecting to fill up at the ten-mile point. Even with that said, though, I'm sure things would have been different if I hadn't decided to test out a new pair of shoes, a pair that, mind you, was a half size too small.

Along the east trails, there is a turn-off onto the Ice Age Trail. Actually, there are multiple turn-offs for the trail, and not every turn-off leads to the same Ice Age Trail. Some will take you towards Parfrey's Glen. Others towards Merrimac, WI.

It was a few miles into my wrong turn when I started to notice the trail seemed to not be following the map very well. Having learned from previous experiences with inaccurate online maps, I assumed nothing was out of the ordinary as the trail was generally heading in the correct direction anyhow. Then I started crossing major roads and was growing fairly certain I was on the wrong path. Still, my map showed no other possible trails. My arrival in Merrimac, though, where the trail dead-ended, settled the issue. I had just taken a ten-mile wrong turn and was now looking at hiking back ten miles with no water and toes already bruising.

It was a wrong turn and a difficult hike back, but it was not the end of the world. Wrong turns happen in life. Get over it.

Read Revelation 3:14-22, Jesus' strong but honest words to a church that had taken a wrong turn. What did the church do wrong? How does it apply to you? How can you change?