

On Rope and Rock

By Pastor Mike Lowe

In northern Arizona, near Lake Powell and not far from the Navajo Reservation, an inconspicuous slot canyon winds its way through the desert highlands of the world famous Colorado Plateau. It was here, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, that Mark and I embarked upon one of the most hair raising hikes we have ever been on. At one point, I didn't think we were going to make it home alive. We were stranded in the bowels of mother earth, and were it not for the goodness of God we would probably still be there today – mummified mountain men waiting for someone to find us.

Mark and I live in opposite directions of the canyon so we agreed to meet in Kaibito, an Indian village on a horse trail. The directions we purchased to help us find the “put in and take out” sites, where we were going to leave our vehicles to shuttle ourselves after the hike, were probably written by thieves and rustlers. “Turn right at the cow carcass, go about six miles, veer left at the old wagon wheel, and then follow the high noon shadow of the windmill until the sun sets.” Guess what? We didn't find the parking places right away. But I am proud to say that after only two dead-end detours we finally found some suitable alternate sites.



About 4,500 years ago, according to the Holy Bible, a devastating flood radically altered our planet. During and after the Flood unheard of forces created mountains, beaches, prairies, forests and barren deserts. Thrashing, sloshing, turbulent wind and tidal driven water quickly carved canyons, caverns and caves throughout the world. In the high desert regions of the Colorado Plateau, a matrix of canyons was formed rapidly as the sandy soup sank and settled. The ebb and flow of water laid contradicting layers of sand and debris which immediately began to harden under its own tremendous weight.

Vast lakes overflowed earthen dams and the ocean bound water cut deep slots in the newly laid layers of soft sandstone. Under the influence of intense heat, cold, wind, water and pressure the canyons are still changing. The many exposed vertical faces reveal peculiar patterns, contorted contours and colorful contrasts. Fossilized plants and creatures are frozen in time and space between the sandy layers. The biblical record of the Great Deluge is indelibly inscribed upon the petrified pages of the Colorado Plateau. And that's how slot canyons came to be, and partly why Mark and I like exploring them.

Our journey began with a mad dash down an extremely steep sand hill. We were flying 15 feet with each leap and bound. The sandy wash below was dry except for a few muddy pools. Evidences of flash flooding were abundant – dangling debris suspended high above the canyon floor, grass and weeds wrapped tightly around various obstacles, toys and trash from the neighboring villages. And basketballs! We found at least 5 basketballs. The whole mess reminded me of shopping at Wal-Mart, or some other frenzied center of chaos and confusion. We checked the weather before entering the canyon and closely monitored the conditions while in it. We were always ready to climb to higher ground to avoid being smashed and swept away by a flash flood.

The canyon walls gradually rose higher and higher while at the same time drawing closer together. We rounded this one corner and suddenly the stench of death hit us like a freight train. The decaying body of a cow was wedged between two boulders, a morbid reminder that flash flooding can be dangerous and deadly. The poor thing never had a chance. We found other victims of recent flooding – rodents, birds, snakes, a coyote, a mountain lion and a deer. Fortunately these disturbing discoveries ceased after the first mile or so. The rest of the canyon, although free of death and garbage, was fraught with surprises and awesome challenges.

The narrowing canyon walls sported bizarre formations, twisted pillars, and crazy contrasts. It was like being in a huge, one way maze with hundreds of secret side chambers. The surface of the rock is smooth like a sharpening stone, but the texture and color resembles the frosting on a chocolate cake. The slot continued to squeeze in on us until it was no wider than our shoulders. Golden beams of sunshine produced a lacey lattice of light, and staring up at the sky past the twisted walls, nearly a thousand feet tall, was like looking through a kaleidoscope.



I saw something slithering in the gathering darkness but I couldn't tell what it was. So out of curiosity, the main ingredient for trouble, I began stalking the little critter. When he passed through a piece of light I was finally able to see what I had been chasing – a rattle snake. Yikes! He was trapped in a hole and we decided to move him to a better place so he wouldn't starve to death. I used a stick to pin his body against the ground until I could safely pick him up behind the head. He immediately wrapped his muscular body around my arm and opened his mouth wide revealing two very sharp fangs.

We found a good spot to leave him, but when I loosened my hold to toss him away he unexpectedly tightened his grip on my wrist. I freaked out and started shaking my arm frantically hoping to get rid of him before he could inject me with poisonous venom. Suddenly he went flying through the air and landed on the back of Mark's neck. It was the funniest thing I ever saw. Well after the snake was long gone Mark was still hollering and doing this spastic primordial dance which I wouldn't have thought possible had I not seen it with my own eyes. He stopped jumping and running in circles when he slammed his head against a rock wall, otherwise it might have gone on forever.

No worse for the wear we resumed our journey. We were now using the rope to help lower ourselves over places too high to safely down climb unaided. At one obstacle I had to stand on Mark's shoulders in order to climb over it. As soon as I could look over the top I saw the wide-eyed face of a baby floating in a pool of murky water. I was startled and lost my balance causing both of us to fall backwards in a heap. Shocked and short of breath, I struggled to describe the horrible sight. With a mixture of anxiety and skepticism Mark climbed up to take a closer look and, thank God, it was only a realistic looking toy doll. Man, was I ever relieved!

There was no other way around but through that disgusting pool, which had a layer of scum several inches thick. Mark was as happy as hogs in a pigpen, but as for me, I hate getting yucky muck on me. Mark went in first and found out it was only waist deep. He was mentioning how slippery it was when my feet slipped and I sank in over my head. You can't imagine how gross it was! When I shot out of that repulsive, sickening slop I was completely covered with slime. I looked like the creature from the Black Lagoon. It was awful. Then something bumped against my leg, and when I looked to see what it was, I saw the beady little eyes of that ugly old doll staring up at me. It gave me the heebie-jeebies so bad that I practically ran on water scrambling to get out of there.

The canyon was now pitch dark and Mark wanted to use headlamps, but I persuaded him it would be more adventuresome without artificial light, so we proceeded in darkness. We were doing fine feeling with our hands and feet when all of a sudden Mark vanished without a trace. I repeatedly called his name, but other than my echoes there were no responses. Then I heard a faint noise, so I stood stock still and listened intently. It came again and this time with the blinding light of a halogen headlamp. It happened that Mark was only 10 feet below me standing in soft sand where he had landed on his feet after inadvertently stepping off the edge of a cliff. Thank God, except for wounded pride and a few minor scrapes, he wasn't seriously injured.

Needless to say we picked up where we left off using our headlamps. We came to the 250 foot overhang we had read about. We rigged the ropes and this time I went first. But after I passed the knot, where two ropes were tied together, I was unable to release the safety knot. I tried really hard but I just couldn't get myself high

enough to undo the safety knot so that I could resume my descent down the main rope. The echoes made it impossible for Mark and me to communicate, and I thought I was going to spend the night dangling on a rope 100 feet above the ground. But after a quick prayer it occurred to me that I could just disconnect from the safety rope and leave it for Mark to remove. And with that I was down in no time. Yes!

At this point the canyon widened, and water oozing from the face of the cliff created a creek which was lined with all kinds of plants and trees. We hiked in the stream until we arrived at a thundering waterfall. It was too dark and dangerous to continue, so we sought for and found a flat sandy place to sleep until morning. We collected a ton of wood expecting to stoke the fire every 15 minutes to stay warm, but this one log miraculously burned all night. In the surrounding bush, eerie eyes reflecting the amber light of our fire continued to circle our campsite. And did I forget to mention the fire ants and spiders and scorpions and centipedes that wanted to eat us alive? And the nightmares!



Without warning a flash flood forced us to seek higher ground. We were desperately clinging to the sides of the canyon while the raging torrent hurled rocks and uprooted trees down river as though they were manmade movie props. The rapidly rising river was threatening to shred us to pieces. The noise was so loud we had to shout short sentences just so we could barely hear each other. Lightning and thunder flashed and roared across the sky like the avenging angel of death. During one blinding flash of light I saw a terrified look on Mark's face, and then a few seconds later during another one I saw him being swept away. I woke up crying, "Mark! Mark!" Fortunately he woke up too. It was only another nightmare.

Midnight and morning light were slowly trading places as Mark and I donned our packs and recommenced hiking. The thundering waterfall that convinced us to bivouac the night before was only about 40 feet high. There were other ways around it but we decided it would be far more fun to rappel smack down the middle of it. And so we did. Wow! Talk about wild and crazy. The falling water bounced off our chests, splattering far and wide creating an elegant spray not unlike the crystal water fountains in expensive high rise office buildings. The cold water, though a shock to our system, served as a coffee substitute. And the invigorating rappel down the waterfall motivated us to continue our adventure with gusto and renewed enthusiasm. We were our old selves again and loving every minute of it. But the best was yet to come.

Clothed with a cloak of warm sunlight we rappelled down dozens of undercuts each one more exciting than the previous leap of faith. Fragile ferns, colorful flowers, rainbows shimmering in the mist, echoing song birds, and our happy hearts made the moment feel magical. We were deeply moved and felt the need to thank our Creator for the awesome time we were sharing together as friends and brothers in Christ. When we opened our eyes we saw an eagle feather, glowing in soft sunlight, gracefully descending between us. We felt like we were standing on holy ground, and in a special way we sensed the awesome presence of God. It made us remember why we love to spend so much time outdoors. Thank you, Jesus. I love you. We both love you. And we look forward to our next adventure with baited breath.

