

THE GRAND CANYON CHRISTIAN

Dr. George O. Wood

I want to speak tonight on the subject "The Grand Canyon Christian." I wish it were possible that we could transport this entire congregation out to the south rim of the Grand Canyon tonight and you could hear me give this little message while the shadows of the sunset were playing their way across the canyon. Since we can't all do that tonight perhaps in your mind's eye you could take moments as I speak and visualize what the Grand Canyon is. If you have been there the visualization will come easily to you. If you have not perhaps a picture or something you've seen will help you create the mood.

We were coming up out of the Grand Canyon when I said to Evangeline and George Paul, there was so much we had learned that day it ought to be made into some spiritual truths. We came up with a number. It was Evngeline who gave me the title. The Grand Canyon Christian!

It was really a life goal of mine to get to the Grand Canyon and I count it a privilege that I got there before I ended my fourth decade. Perhaps if I had waited until the fifth I would not have made it. We had really wanted to ride a mule in. We didn't know the day for sure that we were going to get there so we were unable to make advance reservations. On getting there about 8:30 in the evening they weren't taking any reservations for the next day. They told us we could check in at 7:30 in the morning but it would be doubtful. We did check in at 7:30 in the morning got on the list but weren't called. We made one of those fateful decisions in that moment whether to jettison the whole experience of the Grand Canyon or to hike down in. We weren't really prepared to hike at all but it was a nice cool morning on the edge of the south rim and it seemed to us a good thing to do. If we could get on the trail right away we could beat the mules going down. So that's what we did.

Out of that comes seven things that the Grand Canyon Christian knows.

The first thing a Grand Canyon Christian knows is it's easier to go down than it is to come back up. In the early morning air with the shade on the canyon walls, it was fun to go down. Mules got ahead of us but they stopped to rest and we quickly passed them on our way down. It required no effort at all in fact. We had dropped hundreds of feet within a matter of 15 or 20 minutes. It was so easy.

As we continued to descend without taking stops to rest or anything we began to meet people that were coming up. Some that had started out at 6:30 in the morning. It was 8:30 when we started. They were hiking all the way from the Colorado River about nine miles away. They were making it up the canyon about 9:30, 9:45 when we crossed their path. They really looked out of shape. My heart went out to pity them and I felt a certain kind of smugness. That at this hour of the day they were so lathered. And here was this old man climbing down with his two kids in such great shape and confidence.

I began to feel so good about going down the Grand Canyon that I secretly hoped to make it all the way to the Colorado River and back which would be a round trip hike of eighteen miles. Although we had left at 8:20 I had given Jewel the word to check back at the lodge at 12:00 and check every hour thereafter. We'd be up shortly thereafter. I figured we could get down and up really quick. So we kept on going.

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We walked from 8:20 to 10:40 straight without stopping. Four and a half miles to the midway point between the lodge and the river. Actually George detected a certain prophetic scene about an hour and twenty minutes down the hike. He thought maybe we should turn around. But I said let's keep going and we kept going for another hour and twenty minutes. By the time we had gotten down to Indian Gardens it was about twenty minutes till eleven. The temperature had risen a little higher than it was on the south rim. We had dropped four thousand feet in those two hours plus. And we thought we needed a rest at the Gardens so for the first time we sat down. It felt good to set down. We kept going over and getting drinks of water. After about twenty minutes or so we decided we had rested long enough. We'd better get back up if we were going to meet mother at twelve.

I want you to know that coming back up we underestimated the difficulty. Although Jewel was faithfully checking in every hour on the hour from twelve on we didn't arrive until four o'clock. It took us two hours and twenty minutes to drop into the canyon. It took us almost five hours in getting back.

From that simple lesson I learned that the Grand Canyon Christian knows it's easier to go down than it is to come back up. And friends, if that doesn't describe some of the situations we get into in life. We underestimate the difficulty. We look at people that are struggling in their Christian experience and if everything is going well with us we look at them somewhat disdainfully as if "I'm in better shape than you are."

Maybe the reason why we're in better shape at that moment in our life is we are going downhill. We have taken on no challenges. We've taken on no responsibility. We're not involved in any disciplines that tax us at all. And we simply find life a bed of roses.

It wasn't long on the way back up before we began to realize that we were going to run into problems. Evangeline was the first to feel the climb, I was next. I'm not sure George ever felt it; he was in shape. About a half-hour up from Indian Gardens she began to feel dehydrated and faint. I'm the only one with a hat. Very stupidly we had not taken proper shoes to wear and we had no water with us. As we continued on up, I literally thought at times we would never make it back. I thought they'd have to send a helicopter team down to get us. I thought the mule train was coming back up. Maybe someone would vacate a seat and let us have a mule. It got so bad we would walk, I would count a hundred steps then we would stop and rest 15 minutes.

The Christian life of discipleship involves effort. The prophet said it well when he declared, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion." For every mile you go down with ease if you're going to come back up you have to match it with a mile coming back up.

I say this especially for young persons here with us who have never really strayed from their Christian roots and upbringing. It is so very easy to begin to depart from Christ and begin to walk the way of ease and neglect the discipline of being a Christian. It is a lot easier to lose out with Christ sometimes than it is to get back in a place of discipline with him.

It's always easy to get back. God has a long hook and he brings us back with grace. Salvation would not be the question but discipline is. When we let disciplines go often they're far harder to get back than it was to let them go.

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Romans 5:3 I think puts it well when it speaks of the uphill climb. It says that in our Christian life, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope.”

If every week I had the opportunity to get back down in the Grand Canyon I think I would take that opportunity if for nothing else than to let the suffering get me in shape. Taking on challenges that are bigger than you are. Taking on hardships. Taking on classes that seemingly are beyond your ability. Taking on a dream that is beyond your ability. All of these things are involved in the uphill climb. The suffering that you go through in performing that produces in you staying power and that produces character and ultimately hope is the end result.

It's fun to come back up but it helps to be in shape. I think we all know that – that it's easier to go down hill than up.

The second thing I learned about the Grand Canyon Christian is that your goal is never as close as it seems to be.

As we were descending the canyon, anybody hike down the Bright Angel trail? When you're hiking down to Indian Gardens, which sort of looks like an oasis down there it really doesn't look all that far. I stood on the rim and thought, that's not that far away. After we'd hiked about an hour I told the kids it would be about twenty more minutes. It was still an hour and forty minutes after I'd said it was twenty minutes.

Coming back up we had the same problem. We kept looking for the rim. The further we climbed the nearer it would seem, yet the further away it got. It was the oddest illusion. It was like being in a desert and thinking you had seen an oasis only to find out it was a mirage. The closer your goal is the further it seems to be.

Again, in our own lives haven't you sensed that? When you've thought you've been at the point of some breakthrough in your life, it may be something simple as the person who thought that just one more date would be the pre-engagement date. But now the goal is further away than it ever seemed. The closer you got the further away it seems.

It may be something like this for a church. I really thought when I left on August 2nd that the building program would be underway and the excavators would be out and everything during the month of August. But we found that we hadn't calculated on the valley of tape that looms between our intention and our goal. One of the things that's really critical I think when you find that your goal is not as close as it seems to be is just keep going. If you keep plodding on your goal will eventually match up with the distance and it will be where it is for you.

The third thing I think we learned about the Grand Canyon Christian on that trail is you can't make it without others helping.

You can't make it in life, you can't make it in the Christian life unless other people help. When Evangeline began to wear out on the trail and was at the point of passing out, she sat down and was very white and seemingly flushed at the same time, a couple came along and took one look at her and realized she was having trouble. They said, can we help you? Her initial response was to be polite and say no. But they were wise. They realized that she was in trouble. The lady gets out her jug of water and begins pouring water on Evangeline's head. She takes out a

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washcloth, gets it wet and put it on her head. She gives her orange juice to drink. She begins to get some strength back. She then said, Why don't you keep this washcloth. There was a drinking fountain a mile and a half up then another mile and a half – there were two on the trail going back. She said, Wet the washcloth and keep it on you.

That worked for a while. Then all of us. Some foreign students came along and they saw that we were in trouble again. They stopped and gave us water. Then they proceeded to take one of their jugs and fill it with water and they said, Keep this. They said meet them in the bar and give them the jug back. I didn't theologically quarrel with that. When you're thirsty you're not the most concerned where the help comes from. I don't know what we would have done without that jug of water. We very carefully measured that all the way back up the trail. Nursed that water. Just when we were about at the next watering station we were at the end of the jug. We poured it on us, we drank it.

We were about a mile from the top when a little boy came along. He must have been walking twenty minutes. He took one look at us coming up and started laughing. He was with his parents. He hadn't been on the trail.

I thank God for the people on the trail and knew we were in trouble and helped us rather than ridiculed us. Isn't that a parable too of the Christian life that when we see people who are down it's no time to give them a lecture. It's no time to tell them why they got into the shape. I didn't need a lecture on the trail, "Don't you know you're not supposed to do this in the summer? Don't you know you're supposed to have the right shoes? Don't you know you're supposed to be in shape? Don't you know you're supposed to have water with you?" My wife would tell me all of that when I got back! I didn't need that on the trail.

Don't ridicule people who are down. Someone has said the church is the only organization in the world that shoots its wounded. Sometimes that's the case. That ought not to be. When we're having trouble on the trail let's extend help to one another. Because it's only us helping one another that helps us all make the trail.

If you're in college and you see someone having difficulty in their grades don't stand off and say to yourself, They're not as smart as I am. They're stupid. Or something like this. Lend some of your expertise and share with them.

If you see a Christian caught in some sin, don't stand off self-righteously and say, I'm sure glad I don't have that problem. If the truth were known you have some problems. Go over and offer to pray with them and help them. See that they are restored.

A fourth thing we learned about the Grand Canyon Christian is that experiencing one trail is not the same as experiencing the whole.

We were just on that nine-mile round trip trail. But being there made us realize we were only in one part of the canyon. We could see for miles yet the canyon was far beyond our own what we could see. We must not make mistake of thinking that because we were on the one trail, we had experienced the whole canyon. We had not. I'm not sure we could experience the whole canyon in a lifetime. Although one of the things I want to do as soon as I can do it, and as soon as my next vacation comes, is I already want to go back to the Grand Canyon. I want to see if there's

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anybody around here who wants to take a raft trip down the Colorado River and through the canyon. I know that one trail isn't the whole.

Some people in the body of Christ don't know that. They think their church is the whole thing. I know of churches and you know too where there's such a strong emphasis on subjection to authority and the like that there are literally people in that church body that don't know that there is a church that exists outside that particular church because they've said all truth is in this local church.

Some people have the perspective that the one church/the one denomination they are in is the whole canyon. And it's not. It's a trail. Thank God for the trail. Some trails are better than others. I like the trail I'm on but it's not the whole thing.

There's some in the body of Christ who have the perception that the particular way they worship is the way to worship. That's the whole canyon. But the gospel of Jesus Christ, the church of Jesus Christ is far bigger than that one trail that some people have of worshipping.

I think one of the aspects of a growing Christian is that a growing Christian wants to experience more than the trail they're on. They want to take in their lifetime a sampling of the whole and enjoy the whole. It's always been a pursuit of mine in reference to worship to partake of the whole. I want as a Christian to be able to enjoy Bach as much as I enjoy country western gospel. I want to be able to partake of the great saints of the church whether or not they wore the labels that I wore. I believe the body of Jesus Christ is somehow a beautiful expansive thing. I don't want to get so lost in contemplating the whole that I forget that I need to stay on my trail. Then I'll be just an ethereal spirit floating over the canyon or taking a quickie helicopter ride and never knowing the trail. I'm all for staying on the trail but realizing when I'm on the trail there's more than my trail.

The fifth thing about the Grand Canyon Christian is that on a long climb you need to stop and rest.

Moreso if you're not in shape. I touched a little on that theme this morning. Baptism there is appropriate time in our walk with the Lord where we need to take moments of being the overcomers and the achievers and the do-it-allers to realize that there is such a thing as resting in the Lord. Relaxing. Taking a day off. Taking a break. Taking it easy. Then returning to the trail. If we stop and rest too long we'll get totally out of shape. But on the other hand if we press, press, press and strain, strain, strain we won't be any good either. So the Lord calls us sometimes, Come away my beloved and rest. Jesus knew this with his disciples. That's why on periodic occasions he would say to them, come apart now and rest.

The sixth thing about the Grand Canyon Christian is that he or she knows the last mile is the hardest except for the last eighth.

How did that work? The last mile is the time when I was at a hundred steps, sit down and rest fifteen minutes. I think it must have taken us longer for that last mile than any other part of the trail. But when we finally sighted the brown house at the top of the rim that was about the last eighth of a mile, once we saw it, and could see a direct line from where we were, it was no longer a vanishing goal but it was really there all of a sudden strength returned, vigor returned. I walked maybe the last 1500-2000 steps without taking a break although the incline was still

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about the same. But I saw the goal and it was there and the last eighth was the easiest because I knew long last that we were going to get out. They weren't going to have to fly a helicopter down.

I'm not at the last mile of the trail yet in my Christian life. Maybe you feel that way. Let me encourage you to say, don't be alarmed at the fiery trial you face. That's part of being on the trail as a Christian. When you have expended your energy and you feel like you're very near a particular goal, expect it to be tough but expect also that when the goal looms in view your pace will quicken and you'll be strengthened on the trail.

The last thing I want to say about the Grand Canyon Christian is that he knows when it's all said and done, it's worth it. When I go down the trail again, you better believe it. If somebody were to say, Take a few days off. I'd be ready to go down the Grand Canyon again. It's worth it.

Why is it worth it? It's not really worth it in dollars and cents. My gross value didn't rise or fall. The money I had in the bank was affected by whether or not I went down into the Grand Canyon. My intelligence wasn't necessarily raised or lowered. My physical beauty was not increased. Hopefully it wasn't decreased either. There was not extrinsic value in going down into the Grand Canyon. It was all really intrinsic.

But I will for the rest of my life be able to carry with me that serenity and peace of that day and that wonderment of the great creation God has made which I had never had the chance to see close up hand. That I'll carry with me. But it has no extrinsic value. Only intrinsic. But if you ask me was it worth it? I would say yes.

I think that's the attitude all of us as Christians ought to take in regard to our walk with the Lord. Our labor for him. Our work and involvement for him. Especially when you serve Christ in very quiet volunteer ways. As a result of your service for him, your money in the bank isn't increasing. It may in fact be decreasing because you're giving it a way. You may not have gotten a lot of thanks for what you're doing because it seems so quiet. You may be involved in a regular place of ministry to children. You may be involved in your neighborhood in a quiet way of witnessing to your neighbor. You may be actively involved in your work in a Bible study. Maybe sometimes the price of what you do is you take a lot of guff, even ridicule. You have to ask yourself at times, is it worth the price that I'm paying? Let me say at the end of the trail, when you come back out, it's worth it.

Something happens in us and we behold the Lord of glory in the work and the labor, which we're called to do. If you really want to learn of Christ, do more than read books. If you really want to learn of Christ, even go beyond reading the scripture, although by all means, stay in the scripture. But if you want to continue to learn of Christ, take the scripture, take the books, take the learning, take the sermons, even take the tapes. Take all of that and it's not enough. If you really want to learn adequately learn of Christ, get involved in serving him and meeting others' needs.

Be faithful and be disciplined. When it's all said and done it's worth it all. It's worth it. I hope that you're a Grand Canyon Christian. I know I want to be. I've been there.

We take simple little truths tonight from nature and seek to apply it to our own lives. Come, Holy Spirit, and make your word now living in each one of us as we spend moments of

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reflection and prayer. Have you sought for a goal? It seemed so close but now it seems to have moved away. From God's perspective the goal has really never moved at all. But he has developed between you and the goal and interval of time that he might build in you some desirable quality that you could not have unless he put distance between you and that goal. Keep on walking with him. He will strengthen you. Are all things yours? Do you feel like you can do everything yourself? Learn the humility of receiving from others. Do something that you've never done before. Ask someone to pray with you. Offer to pray for someone. Offer to be helped as well as to help. Let others help you on the trail. Are you locked into a singular perspective? Perhaps you're here today and your own experience of the Christian life has been the home or the church from which you've come. If the Lord now in these coming days and weeks is calling you to experience more of the whole, more of the one trail that you have walked. Will you look upon that whole as something positive to be experienced. Or will you judge the whole by your experience on the one trail and condemn the whole because it does not equally identify with what you have experienced heretofore. Thank God for the trail that he has let you walk but be open to the whole. Do you feel that you have nearly run out of energy and stamina in your Christian walk? Don't be surprised that the trail you face you are near the goal. It is longer in the day. Be still and know that he is God. Rest. And put on the strength of God that you might reach what he has for you. In your heart are you erring from Christ. Are you walking in ways that are easy and safe? Do you know a cheap grace? A grace that has forgiveness but no discipline? Then come to Christ and join him on the trail to Calvary and to the resurrection. Remember that he set his face to walk up hill to Jerusalem. He invites us to carry a cross with him on that trail. All of us, Lord, can realize that it is worth it all to serve you. We thank you, Lord, on this September evening in 1981 in the whole of space and time within your whole creative system, on this day which is numbered to us but doesn't perhaps have a similar calculation to you because it is but a grain of sand in the ocean of your time. On this particular day and in this particular moment we say thanks in our heart to you for giving us life. For giving us your life. For dwelling in us. For the joy of redemption. For the sure and certain knowledge that we are yours now and forever. God's children made so through the sacrifice of Christ. Lord, we thank you and we praise you. Amen.