

GETTING OUT OF A HOLE

Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had left him. Judges 16:20

People that spend a lifetime in a wheelchair must become risk-takers or they will miss out on most of life. I got my first wheelchair when it was time to enroll in first grade and I immediately became a risk-taker. It was not a conscious decision but the natural curiosity of a boy who wanted to do what everyone else did.

It would be impossible to calculate the number of times I was thrown from my wheelchair. As a kid, it was no big deal. Someone would always pick me up and we would start over. I can only recall one accident that required a trip to the doctor's office. I was being pushed across the school playground when the small front wheel hit a chunk of ice on the asphalt. The wheelchair flipped over and I made a one point landing with my chin.

Being in a wheelchair did not prevent me from doing very many things. I went on camping trips in the Colorado mountains. On one particular hike, the other boys tied a rope around the wheelchair and dragged me up the side of the mountain. I played in the marching band through High School. I was not allowed to participate in the half-time formations but I was expected to go along when we marched in parades. The wheelchair did not prevent many activities, it simply made them more of a challenge.

As an adult the wheelchair changed from a manual model to a three-wheel electric cart. Although it did not have the flexibility of being carried and tilted to fit into tight locations, it provided the necessary transportation.

Our family made a visit one summer to my brother's house in San Antonio. We spent several days, viewing the sights and taking in the activities of the Alamo City. For years we had seen the billboards along the highway advertising the Natural Bridge Caverns so we decided to invest an afternoon at the tourist attraction. In my younger years I had been to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico so we did not anticipate any unique problems.

Before we paid the admission price, we specifically asked if the caverns were wheelchair accessible. We were assured by several employees that there would be no problem. They explained that it was a long winding ramp that led to the bottom of the cave and then there were a few stairs that led to the exit.

My brother, who grew up helping me into and out of difficult situations, insisted that we should make the trip. Although I had some reservations, he convinced me that he would be able to get me through any obstacles. Since he is six feet four inches tall and weighs over 200 pounds, I believed him.

We started into the cavern, carefully listening to our guide explain the history and special features. The signs at the entrance should have been our first warning. They cautioned about entering the cave with leather soled shoes because the ramp was slick. Unfazed, we started the perilous journey.

Not only was the ramp slick, it was also steep and the turns were very sharp. It was apparent that the only way to keep me from rolling uncontrollably down the hill was for Jeremy to stand in front of the chair and my brother Steve to hold onto the back. On many of the turns the chair had to be lifted in order to make the sharp corner.

After successfully making several turns, we settled into a pattern and actually began to enjoy the experience. The guide was very interesting and the sight was spectacular. Finally, we reached the apex of the experience, the large cavern at the bottom of the trail.

It was a breath-taking sight. The stalactites and stalagmites (I can never remember which ones point up and which ones point down) were beautiful. It was a powerful reminder of the awesome creative power of God. The arduous trail was behind us and beginning to fade from our memory.

We were quickly brought back to reality as Matthew came running up to us with the words, "Dad, there are stairs!" Steve and I did not get concerned because they had told us at the entrance that we would need to climb a few steps to get out. However, Matthew insisted and so we went to survey the situation.

What was described as a few stairs turned out to be forty-five steps that were not more than five inches wide. It presented an impossible obstacle for a man sitting in a one hundred and twenty pound electric wheelchair. Steve and I are both quick thinkers and we had the same idea. It will be easier to retrace our steps and travel back up the ramp.

After explaining our plan to Sharon and the rest of the family, Steve, Jeremy and I started up hill. The ramp was much slicker going up and the corners seemed steeper. However, we were making some progress. We did not get very far until we encountered another obstacle. There was another tour group coming down.

Not only did we have the problem of trying to pass twenty-five people on a very narrow ramp but we also encountered a remarkably obstinate tour guide. The Cavern had a very narrow-minded policy about not leaving your group, for any reason. She began to scold us and literally chased us back down the ramp.

Back to square one! We were stuck in a deep hole, perhaps the deepest one in Texas, and no obvious means of escape. We had slowly descended into a cavern without little thought about getting out. Our attention was focused on the beauty of the surroundings and the explanations of the guide.

As you can surmise from the fact that I am now writing about the experience, we discovered a way out. My brother lifted me from the wheelchair into his arms and carried me up the stairs. It was somewhat nerve wracking as he held me over the railing in order to fit in the narrow staircase. A couple of men from our tour group toted the chair up the stairs.

We were all relieved to see the light of the sun. It was an unforgettable experience, not because of the magnificence of God's nature but because of our senseless predicament. Most predicaments in life are caused as we fail to recognize that we have slowly wandered away from God.