

Mountaintop Experiences

By David L. Miner

I am tired of them. I don't want to go to them anymore. I won't participate in them again. I don't even want to hear from anyone else about them.

What am I talking about? Some people enjoy them as worship experiences. Others value them as mountaintop experiences. I call them Christian pep rallies. The pep rallies that so many churches and Christian groups hold in the name of God.

You know what I am talking about.

These pep rallies often center around top name Christian singing groups, all of which have a strong high tenor or a strong high soprano, or both, whose voices are quite powerful. A song starts out in a normal key so most of the audience can sing along. But each verse transitions into a higher key so that, after four or five verses, only a handful of tenors and sopranos in the country can sing that high and that strong. And then the final chord of the final verse is held so high and so strong and so long that it raises the hair on your arms and gives you goose bumps. When the song breaks, it leaves you so excited that you absolutely **MUST** shout something. So you shout something spiritual like everyone else around you. And just then the group starts another verse in an even higher key.

After a few of these songs, everyone is so emotionally jacked up that shouting spiritual words and phrases is almost impossible to resist.

And then the worship leader starts a slow, soft song, accompanied by some sort of announcement that "*the Holy Spirit is in this place.*" The leader often says something like, "*Raise your hands if you can feel the presence of God.*" Of course, nearly everyone can feel **SOMETHING**, so nearly everyone raises their hands. And the worship leader leads the audience through several verses of that slow song so that everyone gets the chance to feel God.

And often this whole process is repeated two or three times more, so everyone can go home claiming to have participated in such an awesome worship experience.

But was this truly a worship experience?

And if this was a worship experience, was it a good thing?

And if it was a good thing, was it a biblical experience?

Before I get burned at the stake for asking such questions and raising such doubts, let me make this clear: I LOVE THESE WORSHIP EXPERIENCES!!

I have attended them; I have sought them out on the radio; I own them on CDs and DVDs; I have even led these experiences myself.

But I have come to realize that they are often nothing more than an old-fashioned high school football pep rally with a spiritual emphasis. Pep rallies have a purpose; they aren't bad in and of themselves. *But they are pep rallies.* And their purpose, be it at a football game or at a Christian concert, is to get people excited.

I can, and HAVE, reproduced the same sort of feelings in myself and in others by using the same psychological gimmicks, but without any mention of Jesus.

During the fall of each year, the same level of emotional euphoria and near-hysteria is accomplished hundreds of times each week on high school and college campuses all over America.

Okay, I admit, I probably just made it impossible to avoid being burned at that stake by a mob of angry but sincere Christians.

But before I meet that stake, before you strike that match, I really need to ask the question few people ever want to answer: *WHY?*

Why do we need these emotionally manipulative Christian pep rallies?

Does God need them in order for the Holy Spirit to visit our worship experiences?

Or do these pep rallies primarily benefit the spiritual junkies who need still another "mountain-top experience?"

And is a "*mountain-top experience*" good for our spiritual lives?

As I said before, I LOVE these mountain-top experiences. I am, to some extent, a spiritual junkie myself. But I have to ask of myself and of others, "*Exactly what benefit do we receive from being emotionally jacked-up, even when it is done in a spiritual environment?*"

Maybe we should have started this article with a look at the mountain top experience that Jesus shared with some of his disciples. Perhaps we can get some clues as to the value of that type of high by looking at and listening to Jesus.

We can find the account of this mountaintop experience in Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:1-13, and Luke 9:27-36. All three accounts are virtually identical and all three accounts tell us of the same events preceding this experience: Jesus taught of his coming death;

Jesus taught about us taking up our crosses and following him; and Jesus and his disciples took a week off. Then Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain.

There he was transfigured before them. [Matthew 17:2, NIV]

While transfigured, Jesus walked around with Moses and Elijah for a while. And God put his seal of approval on this particular mountaintop experience by doing his Exodus cloud thing and saying,

“This is my beloved Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”
[Matthew 17:5, NIV]

Can you imagine anything more exciting than this? Think about it! You have witnessed Jesus healing people and casting out demons more times than you can remember. You were hand-picked by Jesus to be in his core group of disciples. And over the past few weeks and months, your role has developed into the primary disciple, Christ’s main man! Then you get to see Jesus transfigured. You get to see Moses and Elijah alive and talking with Jesus. God shows up in a cloud like he did almost 2,000 years ago. AND GOD SPEAKS TO YOU!

And what do you do?

You propose doing something that Jesus does not want!

Peter may have been well-intentioned but his agenda was NOT Christ’s agenda. In fact, it was so far from Christ’s agenda that Jesus told them not to tell anyone about the entire experience; not even the other disciples!

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” [Matthew 17:9, NIV]

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. [Mark 9:9, NIV]

The greatest mountaintop experience in Scripture led the greatest disciple on record to suggest the wrong thing to do!

Or let’s look at what might be the second greatest mountaintop experience in Scripture; this one in the Old Testament and in this one Elijah was not a secondary character.

In I Kings, we can read the story of the first time Elijah was on earth. Starting in chapter seventeen, we see Elijah introduced at the time he was called by God to denounce the most evil king the Jews ever had.

And Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all before him. As if it had been a light thing for Ahab to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took for a wife Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal King of the Sidonians, and served Baal and worshipped

him. [I Kings 16:30-31, AMP]

Not only was Ahab the most evil king the Jews ever had, he married the most evil woman the Jews had ever known! And they both worshipped the most evil god the world had ever seen!

And God called Elijah to denounce Ahab and tell him that God was sending a drought to Israel because of what Ahab was doing. And Elijah did exactly what God asked and actually survived it!

Talk about a rush!

Then God told Elijah to hide in a cave by the brook called Cherith east of Jordan.

After many months, the brook dried up. After all, there was a drought going on, right? So God gave him a new address and Elijah moved to a small town called Zerepath. There he met a woman who was a widow, with a child and who was starving because of the drought Elijah had called down. Elijah asked for some food and she told him she had almost nothing for herself and her son. Elijah told her that if she fed him God would make sure she would not starve. She could have said, "*Right!*" and walked away. But she decided to trust God and did what Elijah asked. As a result of her faith, God fed her and her son "for many days" until the rains came and everyone had food, as it says in chapter 17.

Then something horrible happened: the woman's son got sick and died. You know she had to be thinking, "*Oh yes, God promised that my son and I would not starve, so he let my son die of a fever.*" But Elijah was still walking in the excitement and knowledge of God, and he took the son away to the attic room where Elijah slept. There Elijah prayed and the son lived again. And Elijah lived in peace with the widow and her son until the rains came.

Sometime after raising the boy from the dead, on toward the end of the third year of the drought, God told Elijah to go back to Ahab and tell him it was about to rain. So Elijah and Ahab met, and Ahab was not at all in a good mood.

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Are you he who troubles Israel?"
[I Kings 18:17, AMP]

I am certain that Elijah responded with, "*You haven't seen trouble yet. But trouble sure is coming!*" I haven't found any translation which includes that comment, but I am sure Elijah said it. Be that as it may (or may not), we do know what Elijah said in response.

Elijah replied, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, by forsaking the commandments of the Lord and by following the Baals." [I Kings 18:18, AMP]

And Elijah issued a challenge. He told Ahab to gather 450 prophets of Baal (who Ahab followed) and the 400 prophets of the sex goddess Asherah (who Jezebel followed),

along with all the people, and bring them all to Mount Carmel.

Once there, Elijah put together a rigged demonstration; rigged against Elijah and his God. The 450 prophets of Baal, assisted by the 400 prophets of Asherah, set up an altar of stone with wood on it and a bull, fully cut up and prepared, placed on top. And then this 850 prophets of foreign gods were given hours, from early morning to late afternoon, to pray down fire on the sacrifice.

And nothing happened.

Then Elijah built his altar and prepared his sacrifice. Further, he asked that four large water jars be emptied on the altar; and again; and a third time. After twelve large water jars had been emptied on his altar, Elijah prayed 63 words. Not twelve hours, but less than one minute. And then fire came down from heaven and consumed everything: the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dust, even the water that had drained off the altar and into the trench surrounding the altar.

When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and they said, “The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God!” [1 Kings 18:39, AMP]

I mean, ya think?

With the people properly motivated (and intimidated!), Elijah had them kill all the false prophets of Baal and Asherah.

And then Elijah prayed for rain, and it rained.

Something that is seldom mentioned in sermons and teachings on this event involves everyone leaving Mount Carmel before it rained. Elijah said something like, “King Ahab, I am about to ask God to empty the clouds and have it rain all over us. You better get down the mountainside before the roads get so wet that your chariots won’t be able to make it down the roads.” So Ahab headed down the mountain while Elijah prayed. After praying, but before the rain started, Elijah headed down the mountain himself. But Elijah was so excited and so motivated by his “*mountaintop experience*” that he ran all twenty miles back to town and got there before Ahab and his chariot.

How was that for mountaintop excitement?

But no sooner than Ahab told Jezebel about everything, including the loss of 400 prophets of her god that she used as personal servants, than Jezebel sent a message to Elijah: “*I am going to make you as dead as you made my prophets, and by this time tomorrow.*” See 1 Kings 19:2.

And no matter what his mountaintop experience, and no matter how excited he was about serving God under miraculous circumstances, Elijah allowed his emotions to continue in control, and...

Elijah was afraid, and ran for his life. [1 Kings 19:3, NIV]

So what can we take away from a short review of two important, even awesome, mountaintop experiences? There are perhaps any number of lessons, of conclusions, we can draw from these two experiences, but I suspect that most would make for poor theology. However, I do believe we can draw two valid and valuable principles from these two Scriptural events.

First, mountaintop experiences do not impart spiritual maturity or spiritual wisdom.

Second, mountaintop experiences feed our emotions, and emotions are seldom logical or wise.

I do not believe that I err when I suggest that a mountaintop experience will often lead to a significant spiritual challenge, even a spiritual setback. Think about it.

In both of these biblical experiences, we see the people's emotions in control of them and unwise, even *wrong*, decisions that come out of these emotions. Peter wanted to build three temples so he could continue, or repeat continuously whenever he wanted, that wonderful experience. And Jesus not only wouldn't let him do it, Jesus wouldn't even let him *talk* about it. And Elijah was so excited about God's victories that after seeing God's fire consume his sacrifice, after facing 850 enemy prophets and killing them all, even after outrunning Ahab's chariot for twenty miles, he runs and hides from one woman's threat.

When our emotions are running high, our emotions often make our decisions for us. And emotional decisions are often not based on the Word of God. When we react to what we see and hear and FEEL, it is our emotions that are in control of us and not the Spirit of God.

We live by faith, not by sight. [II Corinthians 5:7, NIV]

Or even more clearly translated:

For we walk by faith [we regulate our lives and conduct ourselves by our conviction or belief respecting man's relationship to God and divine things, with trust and holy fervor; thus we walk] not by sight or appearance. [I Corinthians 5:7, AMP]

So, are mountaintop experiences, are Christian pep rallies, *wrong*?

Absolutely not!

But if we NEED them, if we COUNT on these experiences to maintain a walk with God, if the emotional high is necessary for us to feel close to God and stay committed to following Jesus, then we need to recognize the FACT that we are Soil Type Two, from the parable in Mark chapter four. We need to admit that we receive the Word of God with joy and excitement, but it doesn't take much to stifle our walk with God, or sidetrack our walk entirely. We need to take steps to strengthen our faith and our commitment so we can survive these simple and frequent challenges to our life in Christ. We need to develop the discipline inherent in the word "disciple" and from which the word is derived.

How?

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. [Ephesians 3:14-19, NIV]

In other words, USE those emotions. Use those emotions to drive you into God's Word, to make you want his Word, to make you thrill at the things his Holy Spirit leads you to learn and apply. Feed and strengthen your heart so that your love is more stable and more consistent. Allow God to turn your feelings into a new creation, a never before existing love for Jesus that is as strong and predictable as God's love for us.

We need to exchange our natural love for the love that comes from God and is focused on God and points us continuously and forever toward God.

More specifically, we need to move our eyes from *our love for Jesus* and put our eyes on *his love for us*. As long as our eyes are on our love for Jesus, we will look for opportunities to feel that love and to express that love. When we cannot FEEL love for Jesus, we will lose sight of the FACT of *his love for us*. If we don't FEEL our love for Jesus, we will tend to question his love for us, and to feel distant from him. And then we will tend to seek out mountaintop experiences to help us FEEL our love for God. This will tend to make us dependent on those mountaintop experiences.

But if we keep our eyes on his love for us, then our love for him will be a natural response to his love for us. And a natural response to his constant love for us will be a more consistent love for him.

It is natural for us to be aware of and to experience our emotions. But it is spiritually immature for us to allow our emotions to drive our relationship with God. We MUST keep in the forefront of our minds God's love for us, and the constant and eternal nature of that love, or we will waver and fluctuate in our love for him. It MUST be his nature that provides the foundation for our relationship with him, and NOT our natures.

A mountaintop experience tends to move our eyes from God's love for us to our love for him; from his constant and eternal love for us to our fluctuating and temporal love for him. And if our eyes are on our fluctuating and emotional feelings for him, as soon as that mountaintop experience is over, we are particularly exposed to Satan's deceptions. That makes our mountaintop experiences a danger to our walks with God. Remember, the higher we get, the farther we can fall.

But when God's love permeates and saturates our hearts, we will see wisdom come from our emotions. When God's constant and consistent love for us is the "solid as a rock" foundation of our walk with him, we will see stronger and more stable walks with God after all our mountaintop experiences. We will see God change our lives and the lives of others around us. And we will watch God change us from Soil Type Two to Soil Type Four in that parable.

And then we can totally enjoy and benefit from our Christian pep rallies.

Now, when is the next **Carman** concert?

WARNING!!!

Mountaintop Experience Ahead!

Mountaintop Experiences produce high levels of excitement. High levels of excitement reduce our natural sense of caution. Walking on the edge of a sheer cliff does not seem so scary when on a spiritual high. If you believe you can fly, you are not so concerned about falling.

Keeping your spiritual guard up is most important when coming off a spiritual high or a mountaintop experience. Keep your eyes on God and allow the Holy Spirit to guide your steps. Only in this way can you avoid tumbling off the cliff.

Enjoy your mountaintop experiences, but recognize them for what they are - an opportunity for you to make unwise and emotional decisions or to rely on your feelings in order to walk with God.

Don't be a spiritual junkie where your feelings need constant feeding. Instead, feed your spirit with the Word of God and the fellowship of the Saints.

We have so much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity... [Hebrews 5:11-6:1, NIV]