

Down a Slippery Slope

By Paulette Lovelace

The following story is a true experience of a personal “salvation” type event. It is meaningful in that it conveys emotional experiences that are easy to identify with, while giving a metaphor for atonement that is other than traditional Penal Substitution. This story might be used as an article encouraging Christians to see the atonement not as a one-time transaction but rather as an on-going event of unification with Christ. It is intended to provoke discussion about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in which we are invited to participate. Through the lens of unity with Christ, the atonement is brought near and made available. This story presents the cross as an invitation to die to self and share in the saving life of Christ Jesus.

I wasn't thinking straight when I agreed to a ski lesson. Love is like that you know. Steve and I weren't married yet and were much in that stage where everything seems wonderful, and possible, ... as long as we do it together! So there I was, bundled up in layers of thermal and parka, smiling as I headed for the bunny slope. The smile covered both my hatred for being cold and my fear of failure. I was determined to impress my beloved with my effort. Steve is a marvelous teacher and he spent hours instructing me and encouraging my effort. By noon he assured me that I was doing so well we could try skiing down an actual ski run.

I loved the ski lift. As it took me up out of the beginner area it affirmed that I was doing well. Steve gave me careful instructions as to exiting the lift. I listened carefully and then proceeded to do a face-plant in the snow. It was a momentary embarrassment and soon I was skiing confidently down the beginner hill. We continued like this throughout the afternoon. Up we went on the ski lift, followed by a face-plant in the snow, and then we skied down the slope, over and over. A bit frustrated that I couldn't master exiting the lift, but otherwise inflated with how well I was doing.

Ignoring the cold and exhaustion I was feeling, I kept going. Steve was so impressed with my progress that he suggested we move up to the next slope, which was supposed to be a beginner/intermediate run. I knew I should quit, my aching legs told me so but I could not. I was out of control. Feeding on the praise and approval and the imagined impression I was making on others, I quickly agreed and we boarded another ski lift. My victory would be complete if I could only conquer one bigger run. Greedy and grasping I wanted more, more praise, more approval, and more success. It was as if the mountain was a power fueling my own greed and I could not refuse it.

The lift, this time, took us much higher up the mountain and I began to see some concern in my instructor's face. When we got to the top of the mountain I did my usual face-plant exit and then struggled to my feet. We immediately knew that we had not gone where we planned and were facing a very steep, icy, run. Steve assured me that I could do this; after all, he had only seen my pretense and not my real exhausted self.

This time it was totally different. I could barely stand and fell down every few seconds. After struggling for what seemed like hours we had made it only a few yards down the mountain and the conditions were getting worse. Steve assured me all was well and I could do this. I knew without question that I could not! He gave me some more instruction and encouragement and we started again. I immediately fell, began to slide downhill, and could not stand back up. Suddenly all illusion of being in control was gone. Reality hit me and I was terrified. All my grasping had only succeeding in pushing me to utter helplessness.

Shame and humiliation flooded me and I began to cry. More shame as I lay there on the ice, freezing cold, exhausted, crying and unable even to stand up. Others around me were struggling too but I was the only “spectacle” on the mountain. I imagined their laughter and pity as they gingerly picked their way past my hysterical heap. I felt the humiliation of being (it seemed), the only one who couldn’t get down the mountain, and even worse, was my utter desperation.

My mind raced through options; there must be a way. Steve came alongside and helped me to my feet again. Trying to calm me he told me not to worry that he would get me off this mountain. “I can ski you down” he said gently. I looked down at the incredible sheet of ice before me that seemed to go on forever and I did not believe him. My panic and hysteria returned followed by another hard fall onto the ice. My mind raced for another way down. I thought of faking an injury so the ski patrol would come for me. I could refuse to move until someone came with a snowmobile or something and take me down. Nothing seemed viable. “How” I asked. “How can you get me down this ice?” I cried. Continuing to race through options I realized it was too icy even to try to sit and slide down to safety. “I *can* ski you down,” he said. “You’ll have to trust me, I can do this” he assured.

The next few seconds were an eternity. I was beyond myself. I knew there was no way down this sheet of ice except to let Steve ski me down yet I was terrified of the idea of putting myself into his control. I saw now how my arrogance led me to one false step after another. In my mind and in my panic it seemed that death was to be the outcome. I pictured our tangled bodies falling down the mountain like a Wide World of Sports video clip. I believed in Steve, and knew him to be a good skier but to do this would require a level of faith that was something new. I had to let go of me, and all my self-reliance if there was any hope of surviving this situation. Looking up at him from my cold place on the hard ice, I weakly said, “Ok.”

Steve helped me to my feet again and turned me facing down the mountain. He got behind me and placed his skis outside of mine. He instructed me to relax my body against his and let him take control of the skis. He cautioned me not to struggle or try to help. The first few minutes were horrible as I tried to relinquish control. Steve suggested I close my eyes; lean into him and just let go. It was a strange sensation to lean into his strength and let him guide me. We were moving down the mountain and yet I was not skiing, not even moving on my own power. We turned and went over bumps; we went very slowly sometimes and glided quickly over the ice at other times. We skied and skied and skied. Every time I opened my eyes to what I thought was the bottom proved to be just another giant turn. He went on and on never stumbling, slipping or falling. When he finally told me to open my eyes, we were safely at the bottom.

There are no words to describe what I felt at that moment. The absolutely impossible had just been accomplished. I was dumbfounded, amazed, and in awe of what Steve had just done for me. My sure and certain death had been changed to life. My helplessness seemed as nothing in his strength, and my shame had been absorbed by his love. My weakness and coming to the end of myself was exactly what was necessary for me to be able to trust beyond myself and be saved.

This story reminds me of the way Jesus also rescued me from a slippery slope. It was on a different mountain but much of the story is the same. Love drew Jesus to me and it was love that caused him to risk everything to save me. Despite the façade and bravado of competence Jesus loved the real me; the hurting, helpless heap of shame huddled on the ice. Even though I had been masking and hiding my reality, Jesus saw me as I really am, and stepped toward me. That step toward me was the step into humanity, and into the way of the cross. For me, compelled by the greatest love, Jesus stepped into scorn, betrayal, humiliation, beating, nakedness, ridicule, and the cruelest of deaths; that of Roman crucifixion. In that step toward humanity was all the suffering of all the false steps of all the world. In that right step all the false steps were absorbed.

In the fifteen years of marriage to my beloved Steve, we've reviewed this story many times. I continue to be amazed and thankful for his "saving" me. Recently I asked him to tell me his side of the story and what risk he took. The new awareness I now have from hearing what this experience cost him has caused me to again reflect on Jesus Christ and the sacrifice he made.

Steve remembered being moved by my helplessness. He saw my utter desperation and was moved by compassion and love for me. He spoke of his experience as of having "no choice." There was only one thing to do, "Like if your house is on fire and your children are inside. It is not a question of choice 'A' or choice 'B', but only of rescuing the children," he said. I asked if he knew he could do it and he said again that it was not a question he considered, but only knew that it must be done. I think this must be how Jesus went to the cross. Perhaps he did not even consider whether or not he was able to save humanity from our horribly helpless fate, but motivated by love and compassion, knew that it must be done at any and all cost to himself.

Jesus saw humanity's inability to do anything to restore the broken alienated relationship with our Creator and gave himself to us. In a similar way Steve's willing sacrifice, driven by love, assumed the risk and vulnerability of my predicament and served to "make right" the wrong choice of my independent attitude. I had been enslaved to a behavior that led me to endanger myself, yet I was unable to stop. The cross shows us Jesus' total willingness to do whatever it took to rescue humanity from enslavement to the powers. The price for Steve was not as dear as the death Jesus paid, but still it was costly. The run was so icy that he had to force his (and my) ski tips together just to slow the descent as we slid downhill. He described a burning in his thighs that continued, climbing to excruciating pain as he took me down the mountain, until it felt as if "My legs were being shredded." He confessed his need to stop and rest but would not do so out of concern to get me quickly down to safety, all the while knowing one missed step or one crossed ski tip would have unthinkable consequences.

Jesus did not stop either. He endured the mockery and the undeserved lashing. He carried the cross and wore the thorny crown. He climbed the hill and gave over his life. Maybe he too wanted to stop; but he did not – could not – until we were safe. Love drove him on and on until, by his death, the power of death was destroyed and he rose victorious from the grave. Our life wrapped in his life *is* our rescue.

Steve rescued me that day by wrapping himself around me; in the union of my weakness with his strength I was safe. So too, wrapped in union with Jesus I find rescue. What he did was take me unto himself, and assumed the consequences for my actions. It was because of this union that I was carried to safety while another took on the work of salvation. While I leaned into him in faith, he absorbed my fear, inability, shame, alienation, and helplessness, and brought me through my "certain death," back to life. It was only as I joined in union with him, completely giving up my grasping, that I was able to share in what he already possessed, the ability to overcome the power of the ice and ski down the mountain.

On a different mountain, on a different day Jesus exposed the alienating ways of the powers of darkness. In giving himself for us he absorbed our sin and shame and set us free. He invites us to trust him, to share his life, death and resurrection - through union with him. A moment of weakness and humiliation can be a moment of salvation – an opportunity to relinquish control to one in whose arms we are safe, in whose strength we are saved, and in whose love we are made whole.

Remembering this event, I find myself wondering if you can identify with the helplessness I felt on the icy mountaintop. Do you notice the difference between knowing Jesus can 'ski you down the mountain' and actually relinquishing your life to him so that he will? I invite you to reflect on the love that took Jesus to the mountain of Calvary – for you. Will you lean into that love today? Will you let him absorb all your weakness and failure, your guilt shame? I invite you to lean into him, close your eyes, feel his strength, and let him carry you.

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