

## Sawbill Lake Reflections Part 3

We made the decision to try some hiking in Northern Minnesota. After asking if there were any trails around in the area, the only two mentioned were about an hour away on gravel roads. Of the two suggested we decided to try climbing Eagle Mount, which is the highest point in Minnesota. “A mountain in Minnesota?” I secretly scoffed. How hard could this be?

Piling into the car we drove off into the unknown. As we went down the gravel road driving further and further away from our already remote campground and deeper and deeper into the National Forest, we started wondering if we would ever come to the turn off point. Along the way, however, we saw countless trees and bushes and many hidden lakes. All of this beautiful landscape and hardly anyone has ever seen it! (I drew my conclusion from the fact that it was pretty lonely out there. The only sign of civilization was the endless gravel road.)

Maybe you have played this “game” before too on some of your own travels, but it was kind of fun looking at something a little off the beaten path and wondering if I was the only one on this earth who had ever seen that particular tree or flower or pine needle. It was impressive to think that God knows about every single one of those trees there in the National Forest. It was inconceivable to even begin to understand that he not only knows about those trees, but he knows about every tree in the entire world from the beginning of time!

Finally, after a long dusty drive, we came to the sign that indicated Eagle Mount, and we pulled into the parking area. There were a couple of other cars parked there, and it was somewhat comforting to know that we weren't the ONLY ones crazy enough to be way out there, which could easily be considered the middle of nowhere. After a picnic lunch, we were ready to go off to see the highest point in Minnesota. A quick little jaunt up a little hill and then back to the car for another hour drive back to the campground was what we were expecting.

The trail was very pleasant, as we started out. It began with a winding path through a very dense forest- a beautiful trail shaded with ancient trees. Along the way there were a few surprises, one of which were some boardwalks over marshy land. Bogs on a mountain in Minnesota? I never knew. I busied myself with snapping pictures of various wild flowers and of the kids as they hiked along. It was very nice, and the slight incline was not overly taxing.

After awhile, we came across some rather unhappy women who had already turned back and were heading for their cars. They were huffing and puffing and swearing

that they weren't going on any farther. Obviously, this hike wasn't for them! I wondered what was up ahead that made them turn around.

On we went again wondering that it was taking so long! Surely the end would be just around the next bend! After we had been hiking for quite awhile we came to a large sign that indicated that we were only one third of the way there. "Only a third," I marveled. I hadn't expected this to take so long!

We had a family meeting gathered around the big sign. Some of the kids were sick of it and wanted to get back to fishing on the lake. Others kind of wanted to try to keep going. Since it had originally been my idea to hike, I was given the responsibility to decide what we were going to do next. It was a precarious position to be in. Should we turn around or continue on? On the one hand if I took too much time hiking here I would not easily be forgiven of those who would rather have been in the canoe fishing. On the other hand to finish what we had started would be a good experience, and we had already come this far. My interest was piqued by now, and I really wanted to see what was at the end of the trail...maybe if we hurried and picked up the pace a little I could make everyone happy. We could finish the trail and rush back to fish. It must have sounded like a fairly doable plan, so we agreed and started off again.

Somehow, after we passed behind the sign we knew we were committed. We were in it for the long haul come what may.

It was beginning to get difficult. The younger kids were tiring rapidly, and the fishermen were getting disgruntled. Probably somewhere along the halfway mark when we were seriously having some reservations about this trail, we met some people who were coming down. They had reached the top, and encouraged us with big smiles and well wishes that it was definitely worth the effort to hike up there. That was a big encouragement to us, and it came at a good time.

We stopped to rest again and had a water and snack break. We weren't stocked with water as well as we should have been, so we began rationing, which made things a little harder. The younger kids needed some help, so the older stronger kids began giving piggy back rides to provide a break for them once in awhile. The baby of the family, who had just turned 3 a couple of days earlier, "hiked" the rest of the way on Dad's shoulders. It was slow going, but we were making progress. We were doing this together as a team now, and we needed each other.

A little while later when we were really showing signs of weariness, along came a super athletic family practically bounding up the trail behind us. It was true that their family was older, but it seemed so effortless for them. They were laughing and trading stories, and moving at a much faster pace than we were. At first as I trudged along, I

was envious of their strength and positive attitude, but then after awhile I called upon reserves of strength I didn't know I had until just then, and decided to mimic their behavior. After all, it wasn't like we had given up just yet. We were still in the running, so to speak. Onward and forward! It just couldn't be that much farther!

The landscape along the way was very interesting. At one point the trail curved around a large lake hidden away where no boat could ever reach it. It was peaceful and serene and beckoned us to explore a little longer. As we stumbled along over roots and rocks buried in the trail, I longed to sit at the water's edge and rest, but with our time restriction we dutifully pressed on. What else is up here on this mountain, I wondered?

After we had made it around the curve in the lake we came upon two signs. The one indicated a trail that was little more than a gully wash, which began a very steep incline, and the other sign a few feet away had an arrow that indicated Eagle Mount Trail. By this time my husband and some of the other kids were ahead a little ways, and I was trailing along behind with the stragglers. Now what? Which way was the right way? Being in the tired state of mind that I was, I chose the easier trail and started down that way. Looking back now I think that trail probably circled around the lake, and was named after the mount we were trying to hike up.

Thankfully we had our walkie talkies, and I got an insistent message intermixed with static that I was to take the first trail. At first I reasoned that the trail sign said Eagle Mount Trail, and that was what we were supposed to take! ( I did not want to turn around, because the trail we were on was fairly easy. I needed to be absolutely sure that the gully wash was where we needed to go!) The voice through the static was insistent, so I acquiesced and gave the distressing news to those who were with me. Disheartened, we turned around and found the first trail, which was by far more difficult.

Years ago at a high school church camp I had the opportunity to hike up Horn Peak in Colorado. While Eagle Mount was not nearly as difficult as that, it was still hard. Memories flooded over me of how people had encouraged each other on that extremely difficult climb in Colorado. Now was the time to share the advice I had learned with the kids who were with me. "Pick a spot somewhere along the trail and reach that. Don't look all the way up! When you've reached your goal rest a moment and pick another goal. It's going to be so awesome when we reach the top!"

Another piece of advice given by their dear late Grandpa was "Don't look at how much you have to do until you are half way there." We used this opportunity to remember Grandpa Van Engen, and his wisdom.

Rock after rock, root after root, one foot in front of the other, all the time climbing higher and higher, and all of a sudden, we were at the top! We made it! It was exciting and exhausting all at the same time. We took pictures and celebrated with snacks and water. We looked out over the valley and enjoyed the height. Below us were countless trees, more hidden lakes and blue sky with puffy white clouds as far as the eye could see. The “athletic family” was just leaving, and we sat up there all alone together as a family. It was an awesome experience! God had planned an interesting day for us and had given us a special opportunity to see some of his creation. It was breathtaking!

The trip back down the trail was rather uneventful. The gully wash was a little treacherous with the younger kids, but we made it safely down. The kids seemed to be energized by going back along the trail and remembering the different landmarks from a couple of hours earlier. The fishermen were excited to be on their way back to the campground, and it looked like there would still be some time to fish!

Our Christian walk on this earth is a little like our hike up Eagle Mount. We have a goal that we are trying to reach, and there are so many times where we need the encouragement and support of each other to help us reach that goal.

The Westminster shorter catechism Q&A #1 gives a good explanation of the Christian’s purpose or goal in life. It asks “What is the chief end of man?” and answers with, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

One of the things God has given to us to help us reach our goal of glorifying and enjoying him forever is our church family. They are a special gift to us to enrich our lives by reminding us of our goal, and encouraging us in our walk.

The members of the church quite often give help bearing each other’s burdens just like the older kids were able to do for the younger kids on the hike. In fact the trail became difficult for the older kids, because they were busy helping the younger ones. This particular trail was probably not too hard for them by themselves, but being part of the family they were compelled to help their weaker siblings. With a child on their back the trail became more of a burden. It also became a time of fellowship for them, as they walked along together. It strengthened their friendship with each other just like it does within the church family.

Other times we think the trail becomes too difficult. We feel like giving up just like the huffing and puffing unhappy women, who had turned around on the trail to Eagle Mount. Sometimes we might slip or backslide off of the trail for a ways, but the Lord preserves our faith. He won’t ever let us turn around and give up. His love sustains and nourishes us, and so often it is through the body of believers either offering encouragement or rebuke to keep us focused on the goal.

Often too, we find that when we are facing discouragement the Lord sends along someone to encourage us, just as the smiling well wishers did for us as we were hiking along. Perhaps it is a word fitly spoken. Maybe it is a note from a church member with a Bible verse to remind us of our goal.

There are also those times when we need church members to point out the right way. We need them to show us when we are on the wrong path. It is so easy to get lost in this sinful world and head out for the wrong “trail” of sin. Perhaps the wrong trail seems easier, and we do not want to be on the right path. We need those loving church members to show us from the Bible that we are erring and point us in the right direction.

Now what about those spiritual giants in the church world? Surely we are not daunted by those who are in better spiritual shape than we are like I was with the “athletic family” that blew past us on our way up the trail. Many people in the church world throughout history have been given the calling to be spiritual giants. They write commentaries, books and study materials that we can benefit from.

Sometimes we look at a thick book written by a famous saint, and we think there is no way I can ever understand them. We make excuses and say those people are too smart or they write in a language that is too difficult to understand. Is that true, though? Have we tried to read and study the points of doctrine or church history they are teaching? Hopefully we are able to take advantage of the wisdom they have been given and have shared with us.

If you ever have the opportunity to hike up Eagle Mount or a similar trail I hope that you will be able to compare your hike with your Christian walk here on earth. Remember the trials and the encouragement from others as you are hiking, and compare that to your life, as you face trials and receive encouragement from the church members. When you have struggled and finally reached the goal of the top of the mountain, remember what your ultimate goal and purpose in life is.