

Prowling Beast, Present

An Alaskan adventure puts one frightened faith to the test. by Samuel Hall

I jerked awake, aware not of a sound but of a presence. I cocked my head but heard only the patter of drops on the rain fly. A swish of wind scrubbed even that, leaving a silence as impenetrable and obstinate as the darkness that filled our tent. I leaned down toward Gloria, my wife, and confirmed her quiet, rhythmic breathing. Thankfully, she was asleep.

Then I heard it — the *chuff* of a heavy footfall, then another, like anvils placed on a starched carpet. Cold terror shuddered my body. Another step . . . then another, arcing around the backside of our tent, scant inches away. It paused and I involuntarily raised my arm. I knew what was outside — a Kodiak bear, the Alaskan grizzly that could weigh over half a ton.

I wanted to scream for help. I wasn't prepared for a midnight visit by a monster.

Alaska trip

Gloria had come with me to Alaska on this business trip. We took our camping gear so we could hike in Denali National Park. After the train ride from Anchorage, we made camping reservations at park headquarters. The following day, a shuttle bus took us up the slopes of Mount

McKinley the length of the road — eighty miles. Only low scrub and tundra covered the rugged slopes.

Then we saw them. The bears. Silence from everyone on the bus. We simply stared at the giants. I'd seen pictures — even seen one mounted in a lodge outside Fairbanks that was nearly ten feet tall. But seeing the real thing was like being in Jurassic Park.

Now a grizzly was outside our tent. I fished my watch out of my boot. Two minutes before two. Just two more hours before morning light would overcome the darkness. Maybe daylight would offer deliverance, as fires were forbidden outside campgrounds. My hunting knife would be worthless in hand-to-claw combat.

Scary story

The story of the Fish and Game man flashed into my mind. Before we'd returned to Anchorage, we'd spent an evening with friends on the Kenai Peninsula. They'd invited other guests, one of whom practically called us fools when we told him we planned to hike in the Denali wilderness.

He described what happened to the Fish and Game ranger who set his tent up alongside a rushing stream. In the middle of the night a big grizzly flattened his tent and tried to bite his head off.

That's what the Kodiaks do.

They can't open their mouths wide enough to complete the job, so they end up scalping you. The ranger survived, but it was six months before he could walk. And not everyone lives through something like that.

Prayers

Should I awaken Gloria? No. Better that she not realize what was about to happen. Convinced that we would die that July night, I implored a merciful God to keep us from suffering. I thought of our little girl, staying with Grandma, and prayed for her. Any moment I expected a tornado of claws, teeth, and fur to rip into our tent in a flurry of destruction and intense pain.

Two faltering prayers generated thoughts of other possibilities. Accounts of God's rescue of His people seeped into my mind — especially the storm on the Sea of Galilee. . . .

The waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves . . . (Matthew 8:24-26, NIV).

Images of God's deliverance awakened hope, then a flurry of reasons God would ignore our dilemma: the shallowness of my Christian life, past sins, the blackness in my own heart that spoke blame and pride instead of praise

Savior

and thanks. I began praying the most focused, fervent prayers of my life.

Later, I realized the problem was my concept of God, that He was like me – vindictive and judgmental, uncaring or oblivious to desperate need. The beast outside our tent would be God’s instrument of judgment. Now I’d get what I deserved.

But our heavenly Father is not like us. He’s what He’s shown Himself to be – a rock, our defender, Savior, Lord of the universe. Jesus rebuked the disciples because they forgot all He’d taught them. Only a few days before, He’d told them the parable of the sower. They thought Jesus would call them “the good seed,” little realizing their seed had fallen on rocky soil. When the waves drenched them and the boat rolled before the raging waves, they knew only fear.

Risky trip

We’d asked park staff about danger from animals. “Respect the bears,” they said. “Carry rocks in a can or jingle a bell so you don’t surprise them. They’ll avoid you if you give them warning. You’ll be all right.”

We prayed for protection, but I put more faith in the words of the park ranger than in the voice of God.

I thought back to our return bus trip down the mountain. Amazement and disbelief flashed on the faces of the other passengers as Gloria and I disembarked



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at the Savage River Bridge that evening, alone into the wilderness.

We followed the river about two miles and then put up our tent on a saddle overlooking the canyon. After a cold meal, we took all our food and personal gear and cached it on a high rock some distance from camp. That might have been the most important decision we made that day. If we’d kept one package of food or toiletry article in the tent, this story might have turned out much differently.

Gloria fell asleep right away. I gazed out the tent opening across the barren mountain slopes and finally turned in about eleven.

New day

I continued praying. After agonizing minutes, I sensed a different presence – a calming Spirit, even though the footfalls still stirred outside. I lay back into my sleeping bag at about three o’clock and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Around seven that morning, I awoke, fully alert. The only sound

was the wind, whipping the rain fly. Clouds obscured the sun, but the light seemed to be coming from heaven itself. I awakened Gloria and with outward calm said the weather looked like more rain. Let’s just forget about camping out another night along the Savage River.

The two-mile hike back to the road was edgy, not because of what I saw but because of what I expected to rise up out of the brush. When the road and an approaching car appeared, I finally told Gloria about our night visitor.

We may go through life with a thumb on the scale, thinking we’re ready for life’s emergencies. But our deepest challenge and greatest growth happen when we learn we don’t have to be in charge. Jesus will be present in the storm, when we’re lost or rejected, and even when the bear prowls outside. **BA**

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