

Climber Conquers El Capitan Without Safety Gear

Standing more than half a mile tall, El Capitan in California's Yosemite National Park is higher than the world's tallest skyscraper in Dubai. On June 3, Alex Honnold ascended the granite face of El Capitan in without ropes or other safety gear. This was the first time anyone had gained the summit using the style known as "free soloing."

When asked what he would tell his grandkids about El Capitan when he is 70, Honnold replied: "Kids, that thing takes about four hours to climb by yourself -- after years of effort."

With no safety gear, a climber has no margin of error. Yet despite the fact that watching himself on film can still make his palms sweat, he remains so calm during an actual ascent that his name "honnold" has become synonymous with "standing in some high, precarious place with your back to the wall, looking straight into the abyss, facing fear."

"With free-soloing, obviously I know that I'm in danger, but feeling fearful while I'm up there is not helping me in any way," he said. "It's only hindering my performance, so I just set it aside and leave it be."

Twenty years of training and planning brought him to this moment, the climb of his life. He had reviewed every sequence until each move was seared in his brain and motor memory. Clad in sticky soled climbing shoes, carrying a small bag of chalk to keep his hands dry, he moved gracefully up the mountain face one finger, one toe at a time, across ledges no wider than matchboxes or sticks of gum, at times racing up near vertical smooth-as-glass granite by sheer momentum, and at other times dangling his body above a harrowing drop, his fingertips seemingly glued to the rock.

To understand why Honnold is willing to take ever-greater risks in pursuit of intense experiences, neuroscientists recently scanned his brain. They found that the elite climber is twice as sensation seeking as the average person, and that the amygdala in his brain is "less reactive to threats that other people would be naturally responsive to."

Researchers theorize that super-sensation seekers like Honnold may pursue increasingly extreme activities for reasons not unlike those of addicts who engage in ever-riskier sex, bet ever-larger sums of money they don't have at the racetrack, or up their consumption of stronger

alcohol or drugs to get a bigger buzz. Some wonder whether Honnold is "addicted to climbing."

"A lot of people say I don't feel fear, or that I don't fear death, but ... I have the same healthy hope of survival as everybody else," the elite climber says. "I don't want to die... at least not yet. I just have more of an acceptance that I will die at some point... but I don't want to baby myself along the way. I want to live in a certain way, which requires taking a higher degree of risk, and that's acceptable to me."

When Honnold does feel unease, he sometimes stops a climb to allow himself more time to prepare to face it another day. "Discretion is the better part of valor," he says. "Some days are just not your day."

Other times, he dons what he calls "mental armor," pushes through the fear and clears his head of past mistakes so he can concentrate on the next move forward. By repeatedly facing and overcoming fear many times, Honnold has fine-tuned his ability to reduce anxiety, while developing the physical skill and competence that increase his sense of confidence.

Beyond the logistics of the climb itself, what did Honnold think about during his historic ascent of El Capitan? "The whole village" of his supporters, and the challenges he would tackle next. "This has been my biggest life goal for years. It's been a strategy the whole time I've worked on El Cap... to look past it, so that it's not just all this one moment," the climber said. "Just because you finish a big route doesn't mean that you just quit."

Fear is a biological and internal response meant to help us preserve our lives. Some would say Honnold is being reckless with his God-given life. How can we honor our healthy fears while still putting our full trust in God?

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 4:5-7

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (For context, read 4:1-11.)

After John the Baptist baptized Jesus, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. Then the devil placed three propositions before him, each appealing to the human tendency to seek out the sensational rather than the substantive, the fleeting rather than the foundational, the self-glorifying rather than the God-honoring. Each time he is tempted, Jesus declines the devil's offer of a shortcut to personal fulfillment.

Questions: What kind of superficial, sensational "feel-good" experiences do we seek that turn out to be poor excuses for a genuine encounter with God? How can you tell the difference between these two things? Does the pursuit of spiritual experiences ever become an unhealthy addiction?

Psalm 56:2-4, 9

*O Most High, when I am afraid,
I put my trust in you.*

*In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid;
what can flesh do to me? ...*

This I know, that God is for me. (For context, read 56:1-13.)

This is a psalm of David about his experience in Gath referencing a time when he was being pursued by King Saul, who wanted to kill him, and driven to the heart of Philistia, to the very region where David had slain Goliath, the champion of Gath (1 Samuel 21:10-15).

When David heard that the servants of King of Gath had identified him "he was very much afraid" of the king. David admits his fear in this psalm: "*when I am afraid.*" Fear is a normal and useful emotion, given by God to alert us when there is a real threat to our safety.

David's response to danger is faith. He chooses to put his trust in God, which emboldens him so that he can say "I am NOT afraid," knowing "God is for me." He has faced his fear of human enemies, refocused on God his protector, and transformed his fear into confidence. We are invited to do the same.

Questions: Why is it important to acknowledge our own fears to God? How do we activate faith so that fear loses its power to paralyze and disable us? What steps move us from "*when I am afraid*" to "I am *not* afraid"?

Psalm 34:4

I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. (For context, read 34:1-22.)

David wrote this psalm about the same experience that is recorded in 1 Samuel 21. Driven out of both Israel and Philistia, David fled to the Cave of Adullam (which means "refuge").

There in the darkness David cried out to God, discovering that "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (34:18). In his humiliation, David learned to boast in the Lord rather than in his own ability (34:2). Through shame and disgrace he became more humble and more malleable in God's hands.

Questions: What have you learned during times of trouble about yourself and about God? How does deliverance from fear within pave the way for you to cope more effectively with external challenges?

Acts 21:12-14

When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Since he would not be persuaded, we remained silent except to say, "The Lord's will be done." (For context, read 21:1-14.)

Paul had been told repeatedly that he would face persecution in Jerusalem. Yet he could not be persuaded to alter his itinerary. Other times, when facing danger, he did flee, but not this time.

Questions: How do you determine when the time is right to take a risk? Do you believe God would deliberately call us to put ourselves in danger? Are there times when you feel called by God to take risks larger than you are typically willing?

Prayer for Quiet Confidence (BCP p. 832)

O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray you, to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*