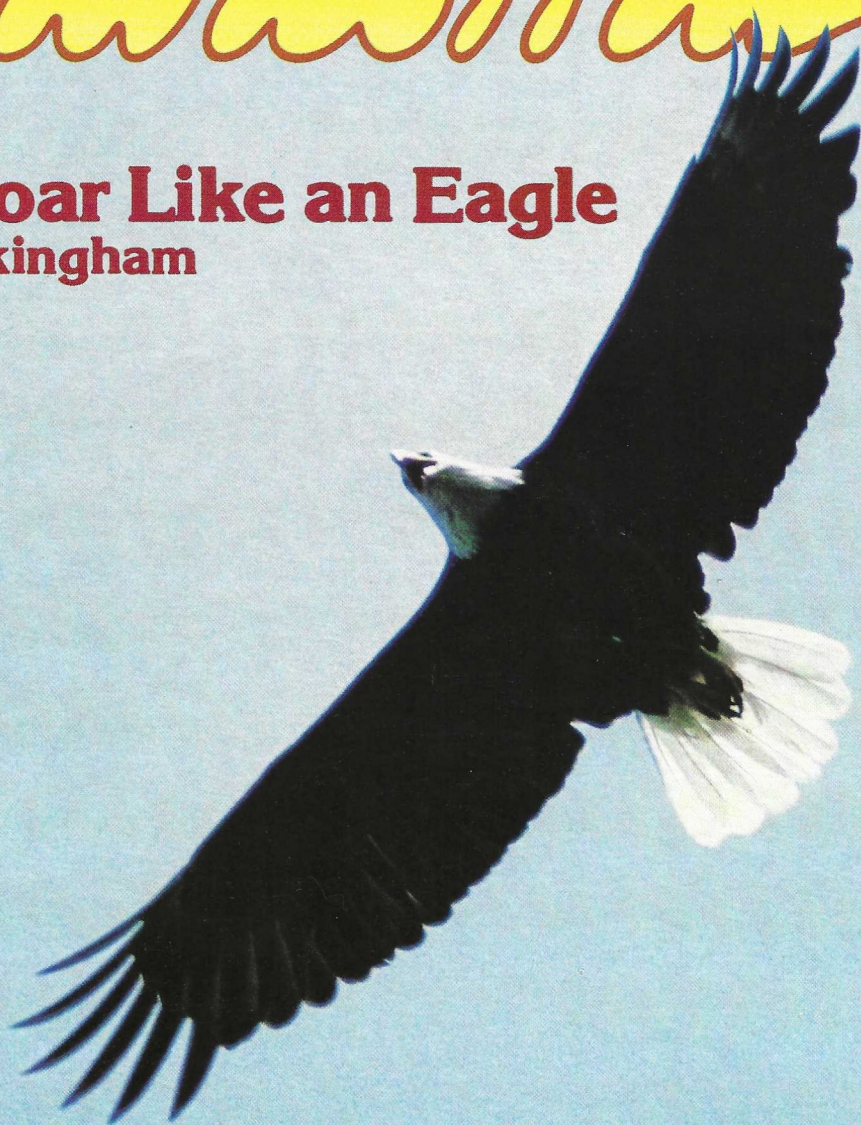


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Dare to Soar Like an Eagle By Jamie Buckingham



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Dare to soar like an eagle

As long as I can remember there has been locked in my heart the desire to do daring things, to risk my life, so to speak, in adventure. But fear had locked the door on my venturing spirit—fear, and self-imposed circumstances.

The only times I dared step out were to do clandestine things which only temporarily satisfied that driving desire to achieve, create, risk, and dare. At the same time, though, I continued to yearn for a legitimate expression to that longing, some way to unlock the door of the cage of my soul so my spirit could soar like the eagle.

Some men find their outlet in the world of business—risking great sums of money for the thrill of gain. Others turn to athletics, disciplining their bodies so they may risk all on the high diving board, by pitting themselves against a brawny opponent or defying death by scaling some challenging mountain peak. Others satisfy their drive for adventure by defying the world to discover them as they move from one tryst to another, planning ingenious ways to meet their lover in a forlorn rendezvous.

Most, however, are forced to satisfy their spirit of adventure vicariously. This accounts, in the main, for the tremendous popularity of adventure movies, spy novels, western sagas on television and even pornographic literature and films. All provide a measure of vicarious release to the chained spirit of adventure which beats its wings on the bars of the cages of the soul. Or, like Thurber's Walter Mitty, we develop our own secret life of fantasy. We lie awake at night imagining we are not really a middle-aged grocer, a computer technician or even the pastor of a church. Rather, putting aside the reality of a slumbering wife in our subdivision bedroom, we

Release yourself to the control of the Holy Spirit. Attempt the impossible, run the risk of failure, dare to praise, to love, to die to self.

By Jamie Buckingham

become, during those last moments of waking consciousness, a renowned brain surgeon, a dashing fighter pilot or a deep sea diver on a mission of mercy to rescue helpless sailors from a disabled submarine.

However, by liberating our fantasies and imaginations, we only feed crumbs to the eagle of our spirit, rather than allowing him to do what he yearns to do—soar free on the thermal currents of God, venturing forth through the tough places.

In my own desperate attempts to free my spirit for that for which I had been born, I ran the gauntlet of all these escapes—and many more. In each of them I found a taste of reality, but it was never lasting—or satisfying. Like a runaway boy, drifting down a river on a raft, I began to catch a whiff of salt air and hear the roar of the surf. But I could in no way comprehend the immensity of what God had in store for me as I rounded the next bend and came face to face with who I was created to be.

Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives He will lead us to all truth. Receiving Him is the greatest of all adventures. He is the key which unlocks the door of our inner being and allows our own spirit, that part of us breathed into us by the Father, to soar free—liberated.

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit, though glorious, is also fraught with danger and risk. No longer will we ever be satisfied to feed our own spirit crumbs of fantasy and imagination. Having tasted the reality of God, we will be compelled to move upward, escaping the bonds of our carnal nature and taking on, more and more, the adventurous, daring attributes of God's Son—who was the greatest explorer and adventurer of all.

For those few who are willing to risk all, to venture out, to die to self, there are precious and unique blessings ahead which the less venturesome will never experience. Such blessings cannot be transmitted, only experienced; they are existential, not visionary; they cannot be given away, only enjoyed at the moment. Such experiences—and there will be innumerable ones for the Spirit-controlled individual—are like those fragile yet exquisite wild flowers sometimes found on the windswept pinnacle of the mountain. You stoop and examine, enjoy and are blessed by their symmetry, elegance and loveliness. How splendid is their form, how delicate their petals, how brilliant their color.

The next day you return with a loved one, but the flowers are gone. They lasted but a day, and only the ones present at the hour they blossomed could experience and enjoy. They are God's gift to those who dare venture out.

I want to tell you three little stories which illustrate how the Holy Spirit has activated my own spirit of adventure. He has unlocked the cage of my soul and allowed the eagle to ride the winds to the tops of mountains where I have tasted nectar I once thought reserved for God alone. I no longer have to fantasize, to daydream at my desk or sit in the evening staring at the fire, imagining romantic things.

Since that grand unlocking a dozen years ago, life has been one continuing adventure. Those close to me are aware of my occasional slips back into carnality. But despite this, I know something special has happened to me. And that's the reason I want to share these little stories, stories of times when the eagle of my spirit caught the upward surge of God's thermals and allowed me to brush my feathers across the face of God.

The first took place on one of my research trips into the Sinai. During our last night in the desert we pulled our vehicle into a hidden canyon next to a unique, sandswept grotto. Hollowed out of the side of the wadi, gouged by the fingers of the wind from thousands of years of shaping, was a natural chapel. That evening after supper, two of the men placed candles in some of the hundreds of little sockets which had been carved by the wind from the red sandstone sides of the open-topped cave, hollow sockets behind a breathtaking facade of red and purple stone. Then, sitting on the soft sand, we waited as the brief twilight turned into darkness. In the dancing shadows of the flickering candlelight which played across the sand and brushed the faces of the men sitting quietly around the grotto—we listened.

At first all we could hear was the gentle sound of the dying wind as it swished and moaned through the rocks. Then, as darkness enveloped us and the Sinai stars appeared overhead in all their brilliance, all we could hear was our own breathing, and the gentle beating of a dozen hearts beside us.

Someone quoted a passage from the Psalms:

Before the mountains were brought forth, or even thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting, to everlasting, thou art God....

Someone else prayed a soft prayer of thanksgiving and praise. Someone else began to sing:

Praise the name of Jesus, He's my Rock, He's my Fortress

We joined in and then let our voices follow the focus of our hearts as our singing departed from the confines of structure and soared gently into the spirit, listening, at the same time, as the angels of the Sinai—those special heavenly beings who live in that desolate section of the world—joined in. How seldom do they have a chance in that forsaken wilderness to blend their voices with those of the redeemed.

Then, as the evening grew quiet—with a stillness not equaled anyplace else on earth—one of the men, Derrel Emmerson, began to sing alone. I listened intently, for it was a new song. It was beautiful, a quiet chorus of praise which I assumed Derrel had often sung in his church back in the Washington, D.C., area. He sang three stanzas, repeating the chorus between each stanza. I wished I had brought my little tape recorder into the grotto so I could have captured the song. I made a mental note to ask him to sing it into my recorder the next day. I wanted to learn it so I could take it back and teach it to my friends in Florida.

The next morning as we were breaking camp to head northward, I took my little tape recorder out of my duffel bag, found Derrel where he was rolling up his sleeping bag and asked if he would repeat the song he sang last night.

"What song?" Derrel asked.

"The one you sang in the grotto," I answered. "That beautiful little chorus your folks must sing in your church."

Derrel grinned. "I don't remember it."

"I don't understand. You sang all three stanzas last night. I can almost remember it myself but not quite."

"I'm sorry," he laughed, returning to his packing in the sand. "But I was singing in the Spirit. It was all spontaneous."

"But it had perfect rhyme and meter. You repeated the chorus with each stanza."

"I know," he said, "but it was just one of those very special times. I sensed the presence of the angels around me, and suddenly I was singing. Perhaps it was only for their ears, since they don't have much company down here. Whatever, it was obviously not meant to be repeated—for I cannot remember a single line of the lyrics or melody."

There are special blessings, I've learned, awaiting those who venture out. Authored in eternity, they break

through into time and space only as men move upward toward God. They are never to be repeated, never to be shared, never to be wrapped in a package to be given away. They are like the blessings of breath: inhaled deeply, disseminated into the system and never to be recovered in form, only in energy.

Each step of the way He guides, leading us to new heights of adventure and experience. The way may seem dangerous as we turn loose of all the safety devices of the past and set our faces toward the things of the Spirit, but there is a glorious reward far more precious than the turquoise nuggets of the ancient mines which awaits those who dare run the risk of discovery.

The joy of adventure remains only as long as God controls. When man steps in with his reasons and fears to institutionalize and structure (or even record) that which is meant to flow free and unencumbered, life leaves. Yet it is this lack of institutionalizing which is the single factor preventing us from venturing out.

How desperately the human soul wants to see a blueprint of the next step, to exert an element of control over what is about to happen. It is only the spirit in us, that essence of God inside each of us, which is afraid of the unknown. It urges us to dare, to release our tow line to that mechanical device which has helped us break the elementary bonds of earth, and soar free on Zephyr's currents toward the dwelling place of God.

After that final night in the wilderness, our small group of men packed our gear and boarded our open truck for the long ride back to Jerusalem. Driving eastward through the expanding valleys we hit the coastal road along the Gulf of Elat and drove north through the deep, geographical rift called the "Arabah" to the western coast of the Dead Sea. The west wind blowing off the Negev Desert was oven temperature, and by the time we reached the beautiful oasis at Ein Gedi we were almost parched.

Ein Gedi is a deep ravine almost two miles long. References to it appear throughout the Bible. It was here David encountered Saul and had the opportunity to slay him while he was alone in one of the numerous caves along the valley.

Instead, he only cut a piece of cloth from Saul's garment and told his lieutenants that he could not "touch

God's anointed." It was also here that David wrote some of his most beautiful psalms. The valley still abounds with wild life, mountain sheep, ibex and smaller rodents.

The Hebrew word "ein" means "spring." And at the top of the deep ravine is a magnificent waterfall, flowing from this huge spring. Below are a series of smaller waterfalls and deep pools of clear, running water.

While the rest of the men went ahead to the waterfall at the top of the ravine, three of us—Mike Evans, Derrel Emmerson and I—stopped to swim

in a secluded pool formed from solid rock. I had been to the top before, and after the hot dusty ride climaxing two weeks in the desert, I was ready for a cool dip in pure water.

We stripped, laid our shorts and sandals on a high rock near the water and plunged into the icy pool. For days our skin had been parching in the sun, and the sensation of the cool water swirling around our bodies as we splashed and frolicked was delightful. In the shallow places we could rest on the cool rocks, letting the water caress our skin and enjoying the sun which fil-

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tered through the overhanging trees and danced like diamonds on the surface.

After long minutes of immersing our bodies in the water, we crawled up on a huge warm boulder. The other men in our group had scattered up and down the canyon. Yet we knew, all three of us in a corporate way, we were not alone in that quiet, secluded place. Others had been there before us: David the shepherd, the mighty warrior Joab, the prophet Samuel. Their spirits had left an indelible presence in the canyon. But it was not this "communion of the saints" which attracted us nor even again the presence of angels as much as our deep awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In an act of simple worship, the three of us stood, stark naked, our bare feet on the warm surface of the rock, and raised our hands toward heaven. The sun broke through the trees and bathed us in warmth, drying our wet bodies as we stood, voicing our praise to God in word and "spiritual song," singing in the spirit and shouting praises which echoed back and forth off the steep rock walls of the wadi. It was a special moment of high ecstasy, rapturous in nature, as we presented our bodies before Jehovah God.

Free from all inhibitions, released from embarrassment, liberated from the restraints of culture and clothes, I began to soar. Ecstasy, in this case, cannot be equated with the popular and cheapened sense of "hysteria" but goes far deeper to the historical, etymological sense of "ex-stasis"—that is, literally to "stand out from," to be freed from the perpetual dichotomy of most human activity until there is but one focus—God. *Ecstasy* is the accurate term for the intensity of consciousness that occurs in pure worship. It is far more than the Bacchic concept of "letting go"; it involves the total person—body, soul, and spirit—subconscious acting in unity with the conscious—intellect, emotion and spirit joining in one intense concentration on God. Not before, nor since, have I felt as totally immersed in the *ecstasy* of worship—soaring with the eagles.

The third and final adventure story I want to tell has to do with the lesson I learned from my father shortly after I returned from that particular trip to the Sinai. Watching my dad grow old was one of the great experiences of my life. My father was my hero. I admired everything he did. I admired the way he quoted long passages of Kipling, Longfellow and James Whitcomb Riley. When I was a child I respected

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him as a man of ethics and nobility, a churchman in the cultural sense of the word. Later, after he surrendered his life to Jesus Christ in his 60th year, I respected him even more as a committed Christian. I was impressed with his business ability. I honored his financial wisdom.

But most of all, I respected him as a man. Although his world, during those last few years of his life, was confined to his wheelchair, his desk and his bed, nevertheless he remained a great adventurer. Always exploring. Always venturing out in his mind and spirit.

On his 80th birthday he began to grow a mustache. He had always been clean shaven, but the closer he grew to eternity, the more he let his inhibitions and traditions fall away.

"I've wanted to grow a mustache since I started shaving, 67 years ago," he said. "But it was never proper in my circles. Now I am putting away many of my proper things and becoming real."

He wore it for five years and shaved it off. "It's just not me," he said, "but I'm glad I did it just the same."

I loved him for it. And I loved him for the other areas of adventure I recognized in his life. We had always been a very "proper" family. But in his later years, Daddy finally found freedom to put his arms around women other than his beloved wife of more than 50 years. The older he grew, he told me, the more he realized he had confused impropriety with impurity. Life was too short not to enjoy all the beautiful things God had put around him.

When we prayed together, as we often did when I visited him, he would defy his old Methodist tradition and join in with a hearty "Amen!" or a sincere "Praise the Lord!" Sometimes he would sit in his wheelchair and raise his hands in worship as I read to him or as one of his women friends played the piano and sang. He was not ashamed when others saw him weep when he was moved emotionally.

And he loved to take my mother's hand or kiss her in front of the children and grandchildren, something we had never seen him do in his younger years. Some may have equated his "freedom" with senility or old age; I

attributed it to spiritual maturity.

Thus, as he approached the time of dying, I watched him closely.

Of all the things I wanted to learn from him, how to approach death was the most important. I have often contrasted my reaction to my father's preparation to die with that of the contemporary poet, Dylan Thomas. Thomas, writing on the death of his father, you remember, began his poem by saying:

And you, my father, there on the sad height,

Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And the poem ends:

Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at the close of the day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Of course it was the son writing, not the father. The father had to confront death and in some way accept it. But he did it battling against the insurgent spirit of the son, who, despite the piercing elegance of the poem, was still rebelling against a God who would take from him the man who meant most in his life.

On the other hand, I never, not once, had any desire to ask my father to linger or to plead with him to rage against his appointment with death. Indeed, I urged him to go gentle into that good night and to bless me, not with fierce tears, but to bless me with insights into eternity—and to communicate, as much as was humanly possible, all he learned as he walked through the valley of the shadow.

My father saw old age as the greatest of all the adventures of life. His ongoing prayer was that as his body wore out, he would remain alert in mind so he could savor and enjoy all that lay ahead. My father never drank alcohol—not a drop that I know of.

Alcohol was a depressant, he said, and he wanted to remain alert with every cell of his body to experience all that God had for him as he ascended the heights. Nor did he need it, as some do, to free him from his inhibitions.

Yet as I watched my father—moving rapidly toward eternity—become free, I realized how stiff and unyielding I remained in many areas of my life. Especially was this true in my expression of affection between us.

Our family had never been overtly

affectionate. We seldom hugged and almost never kissed—at least not when I was a boy. Occasionally my mother would kiss me, but I had never, to my knowledge, kissed my daddy. We men shook hands. Daddy taught us how to give a firm, manly handshake and how to look the other fellow straight in the eye while we were doing it.

But as I watched him become free and felt my own love for him growing, I longed to express my affection in a more physical way. Yet every time I was with him and it came time to say goodbye, instead of bending and kissing him as he sat in his wheelchair, I always stuck out my hand. Even the words “I love you” stuck in my throat.

Finally I could stand it no longer. My sophistication and my twisted concepts of masculinity were choking me to death. One Saturday afternoon I got in the car and made a special trip south along the Florida coast to my parents’ home, 35 miles away. Walking into my dad’s little study, I found him in his wheelchair, at work on his ledger.

“I have come for one purpose,” I said. “I want to tell you something and then I want to do something.”

He looked up, grinned, and said, “Fine.”

Suddenly I felt like a fool. I was 46 years old—he was 86. But I had come this far and was not going to back out.

“I love you,” I said, choking up.

“Is that what you came to tell me?” he asked gently, putting his pen on the desk beside his green ledger and resting his hands in his lap.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“You didn’t have to come all the way down here to tell me that,” he grinned. Then he added, “But I’m sure glad you did.”

“I’ve wanted to voice the words with my lips for years,” I said.

“I find it easy to write them on paper. And I know you have known. But it has been difficult for me to say it with my mouth. Perhaps,” I added, “I needed to say it more for me than for you.”

His face grew pensive, and he nodded slowly.

“There is something else,” I said.

He did not look up from his place at the desk but continued to look straight ahead, nodding slowly.

I bent and kissed him, first on one cheek, then the other, then on top of his bald forehead.

He reached up, took my arms in his strong hands, and pulled me down to him so he could put his arms around my neck. For long moments we re-

mained in that awkward position—me bending over his wheelchair, he with his arms around my neck, pulling my face up against his.

Finally he released me, and I straightened up. There was a trace of tears in his eyes, and his lip quivered as he spoke.

“My father died when I was a young man back in Indiana,” he said, “I left home shortly afterwards to go to college, teach school and finally go to France in World War I. After the war I moved to Florida. I never returned home except for occasional visits to see my mother.

“When my mother grew old, I invited her to come live with us.” He paused, and his face broke into one of those knowing grins. “Guess what she said? She said, ‘No, I’ll stay right on here in Morristown in this house. But I love you for asking me to come live with you and even though I’ll never do it, I hope you keep right on asking me up until the day I die.’”

Something broke loose in me that Saturday afternoon. Something which had been knotted up for years. Once again, as I had in the Sinai, I felt my spirit burst free. I left my parents’ house in Vero Beach wanting to run home, leaping and dancing, rather than getting in the car and driving back up the coast. My wings, like the eagle’s, were locked against the storm. I was soaring.

Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman is reported to have asked General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, what was the secret of his success. Booth replied, “I will tell you the secret. God has had all there was of me.”

I’m not there yet, but I’m a lot closer than I have ever been. That’s why I have written this. It’s all tied in with my own purpose in life—my defined reason for existence. I wrote it to encourage you to release yourself to the control of the Holy Spirit, to dare to cross mine fields, to climb mountains, to explore caves, to hear the voice behind the ranges. I have written to urge you to attempt the impossible, to run the risk of failure, to dare to praise, to dare to love, to dare to die to self. I have written in hopes you will become the person you are—which is the essence of salvation—and to know the joy, the thrill, of letting the Holy Spirit control your life as you soar like the eagle through the tough ventures of life. ➤

Jamie Buckingham is a popular Christian speaker and author of 27 books.