

DANGER CALLING

TRUE ADVENTURES OF RISK AND FAITH

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jackson, Peb.

Danger calling : true adventures of risk and faith / Peb Jackson, James Lund.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8007-3404-6 (pbk.)

1. Christian life. 2. Risk taking (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Adventure and adventurers. I. Lund, James L. II. Title.

BV4598.L5.J33 2010

248.4—dc22

2010013620

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Published in association with William K. Jensen Literary Agency, 119 Bampton Court, Eugene, Oregon 97404.

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction

This isn't your typical Bible study. We're going to take you on a high-adrenaline ride to places few people dare to venture—the rarified air at the peak of Mount Everest, the black waters at the bottom of the Atlantic, the steaming jungles of the Philippines, and the frozen floes of the Antarctic. We'll also take you to a few other places just as dangerous and thrilling—the depths of your heart, life, and faith.

You don't need a theology degree for *Danger Calling*. This is a book of true stories. It features people in extreme circumstances, often brought on by their own extreme choices. Some stories will be familiar. Some have never been told before. All will keep you in suspense, with lives hanging on every decision.

This is also a book of questions. We're going to challenge you to think about your response to each story and what it means to you. You'll find no pat answers. We'll explore four primary themes—sacrifice, perseverance, courage, and leadership—with questions such as these: *Would you stop to help a climber in the Death Zone on Everest? How much are you willing to risk for fame and glory? What is your source of strength in a crisis? Could you lead men and women into battle knowing some are likely to die?*

Part of our goal is to help you discover who you are. But we also want you to find out who you were meant to be. We want you to know where you stand in your faith. Through this book, we're asking: *Do you have a relationship with God? Are you a little too comfortable in your faith? Is he calling you to a life of greater risk and deeper meaning?*

We are a couple of guys who are fascinated by the often-hidden benefits of risk and danger and how they connect to faith. Peb is the true adventurer. As a youth, he scaled the ten-story water tower in his hometown of Haviland, Kansas (unroped). He's been testing his limits on mountains, bike trails, rapids, and jungle safaris ever since. Jim is the writer who can't decide which he loves more—a great hike in the wilderness or a great story about one. We had a good time joining forces on our first book of adventure stories, *A Dangerous Faith*. We wanted to go further, to reach into the hearts of men and women and lead them to their calling. Inspired by conversations with our agent, Bill Jensen, we began talking about a new project that would challenge readers with provocative questions about life and faith. We desire to invite today's men and women into an adventure that's as old as our existence: "Seek me and live" (Amos 5:4). The result is in your hands.

How you approach *Danger Calling* is up to you. The sixteen stories and accompanying questions are designed for talking over in a small group, but you can certainly tackle them in a larger group, with just one friend, or on your own. The idea is to read one story before you meet with your group and then go through the follow-up material for that story. *Would You? Could You?* features probing questions and relevant Scripture passages. Use it to think about what you want to say to the group. As you go through it, write down other verses to share and discuss. *Reporting In* is your invitation to connect with the Lord through prayer, either as a group or individually. *Hitting the Trail* is a section just for you, an opportunity to write down and apply whatever you're learning.

New Territory lists more questions and books, videos, and other resources to explore when you want to dig deeper.

When you meet with your group, be honest and open about your ideas and doubts. You won't get much out of this book if you say only what others want to hear. Remember to give everyone a chance to share, and encourage each other to tell your own stories of danger and faith. Allow time to thoroughly discuss each question. Depending on the dynamics of your group, feel free to take on more stories in a session. And once you're done with *Danger Calling*, don't just throw it away. Wait a few months or a year, then go through it again. You may be surprised by how much your life and faith have changed.

You won't always be comfortable with the questions in this book—or your answers. That's okay. You're starting a daring adventure, and risk and adventure are never easy. The Lord designed it that way. He uses our struggles and our proximity to danger to draw us closer to him. We find him on that precarious ridge between the comfortable and the unknown. It's where we need to be. It's the place where we discover that the more we risk and trust God, the closer we move to his heart and the higher calling for which he created us.

Thank you for joining us on this journey. Are you ready? It's time to dive deeper into danger and nearer to the Author of the greatest adventure of all.

PART ONE

SACRIFICE



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Danger Calling: True Adventures of Risk and Faith,
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1

Death Zone

When he saw him, he took pity on him.

Luke 10:33

You're alone at twenty-seven thousand feet on what the native Sherpas call *Chomolungma*, or "goddess mother of the world." It's Everest to everyone else, the world's highest and most famous mountain. The temperature is minus twenty degrees Fahrenheit. Icicles cling to your beard, your hands tingle ominously, and you can no longer feel your toes inside your climbing boots. You're exhausted, and at this altitude, five miles above sea level, it takes at least four deep breaths to gather enough energy for a single step. Somewhere in the recesses of your mind, a warning siren sounds. You know Everest is deadly. More than two hundred people have died here since Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first scaled the summit in 1953.

But you're not thinking about the danger. You're caught up in the dream. You've been climbing since age eleven when you first watched a TV documentary about Hillary. You

love the thrill of focusing every aspect of mind and body on that next precarious step, that next tantalizing handhold. It's what makes you feel alive. You've devoted thousands of hours, and dollars, to this sport. You've climbed Elbrus in Russia, Denali in Alaska, Aconcagua in Argentina. It seems as if your entire life has been preparation for this day, this moment.

I'm almost there, you think. Just another two thousand feet.

Step.

Breathe.

Almost there.

Britain's David Sharp is another climber who badly wants to reach the summit of Everest. The thirty-four-year-old engineer has already come close twice, once as part of an expedition and once on a solo attempt. Both times, a combination of weather conditions, frostbite, and lack of oxygen forced him to turn back. He lost parts of two toes in the process.

But in May 2006, he is back on Everest for what he sees as his final try at the roof of the world. He has better gear this time, including a pair of red Millet Everest knee boots, and is determined to succeed. He tells a fellow climber, "I would give up more toes, or even fingers, to get on top."

On this trip, Sharp is loosely affiliated with an expedition outfit called Asian Trekking International, but he is essentially climbing alone, as he'd planned. Before leaving for Nepal, he told his mother in England, "You are never on your own. There are climbers everywhere."

In the first week of May, from base camp at 17,060 feet, Sharp launches his bid for the summit. He reaches the North Col and establishes a camp at about 25,920 feet, but snow and wind on the third day force him to retreat.

While at advance base camp, he discusses the use of bottled oxygen with a climbing guide. The guide is a purist who advocates climbing by “fair means,” though only a small percentage of the climbers who successfully summit Everest do so without oxygen. Sharp tells the guide he plans to use gas only in an extreme emergency. As far as the guide can tell, Sharp has but one four-liter cylinder.

The oxygen issue is not an idle one. The threat of “mountain sickness”—including the deadly pulmonary or cerebral edema—hangs over every high-altitude climber. In the case of pulmonary edema, the combination of low oxygen pressure and high exertion can force fluid into the millions of small, elastic air sacs inside a person’s lungs. If the fluid builds up enough so the air sacs can no longer absorb oxygen, the victim essentially drowns on the inside. With cerebral edema, it is the brain that swells with fluid, creating pressure inside the skull. Some people are more susceptible than others, and the precise cause is still a mystery.

Of course, any of the symptoms of severe mountain sickness—extreme shortness of breath, fatigue, coughing, blood in the sputum, stumbling, lack of coordination, hearing or seeing things, drowsiness—can be fatal to a climber laboring in harsh conditions on a Himalayan mountain. The use of bottled oxygen can at least delay the effects of these symptoms.

On May 11, presumably with his lone oxygen bottle, David Sharp resumes his quest to reach the pinnacle of Everest. Three days later, a little after 1 a.m., Colorado guide Bill Crouse and several fellow climbers encounter Sharp in the darkness at approximately 27,560 feet. Sharp sits down and unclips from the fixed rope to let the group pass. The climbers wave gloved hands at each other. No one has time or energy for conversation.

More than ten hours later, a little after 11 a.m., Crouse and his team have already summited and descended to the top of a rock band known as the Third Step, just 490 vertical

feet below Everest's peak. They are trying to move quickly, before their oxygen runs out and in hopes of avoiding a bottleneck of climbers farther down. The group again sees Sharp, now at the base of the Third Step. He's clipped to the fixed line but is off to the side, out of the wind. Crouse and his team continue to descend, unclipping from the line to move around Sharp.

"Watch out," Crouse tells Sharp as he passes. There is no reply.

About an hour and twenty minutes later, Crouse looks back and sees Sharp has moved up another three hundred feet. It appears no one else is ascending. "That guy's heading up pretty late," he says to another climber. About 2 p.m., Crouse glances up the route and spies Sharp one last time. He's past the Third Step, but he has advanced only another hundred yards toward the summit.

David Sharp's activities for the next several hours are lost to history.

Early the next morning, just before 1 a.m., an ascending film team reaches an alcove at the base of the technical pitch called the First Step. They are at 27,760 feet. The team's guide expects to find a body there, the victim of a disastrous 1996 storm and who is now known to climbers as "Green Boots." But the guide is startled when his headlamp illuminates a second body tucked beneath the overhang. This figure's boots are red.

A closer examination reveals a climber still clipped to the red-and-blue guide rope, sitting with his arms wrapped around his knees. He is alive but has no oxygen mask on. Ice crystals have formed on his closed eyelashes. His nose is black. The guide yells at the man to get moving, but there is no response. Believing the man is in a hypothermic coma and sadly beyond help, the guide decides to move on. "Rest in peace," a climber says as he leaves.

About twenty minutes later, an ascending Turkish group discovers "Red Boots"—Sharp—but now he is apparently

recovered enough to wave them off. The Turks also continue their climb.

In all, more than thirty climbers pass by the First Step overhang that morning on their way toward the summit. After the Turks, apparently, each of these climbers either does not notice the figure sitting there, or assumes it is Green Boots, or decides that there are now two dead bodies at the First Step. For the next seven hours—the critical time when, perhaps, David Sharp’s life hangs in the balance—no one stops to investigate.

Finally, at about 8:30 a.m. on May 15, two Sherpas assisting their female client down the mountain discover Sharp.

“This look like new body, man,” Dawa Sherpa says.

“No, this one die long time ago,” the other Sherpa replies.

“No, no, he is another body, a new body.”

Dawa looks closer and finds Sharp alive, but barely. His legs are frozen. His face is black. Icicles hang from his nose. Dawa unzips Sharp’s down jacket to touch his chest—icy cold.

There is little the distressed Sherpas can do. Their client, who was attempting to become the first Turkish woman on the summit, collapsed and lost consciousness just eight hundred feet short of the goal and is still unstable. Both Sherpas are already exhausted, and Dawa tore muscles in his chest during a coughing fit. It will take all their strength to guide their impaired client down to safety. Reluctantly, they turn and leave.

Over the next few hours, more climbers discover Sharp and try to render aid. One group tries to pour hot water down his throat. Another administers oxygen, drags Sharp into a patch of sunlight, and tries unsuccessfully to get him to stand. Sharp revives enough to say to one Sherpa, “My name is David Sharp. I’m with Asian Trekking, and I just want to sleep.”

Maxime Chaya, who earlier that day became the first Lebanese citizen to scale Everest, hadn’t noticed the man with

red boots on his ascent. On the way down, however, he sees Sharp and attempts to revive him. Finally realizing it is too late, Chaya sits with Sharp and weeps. Nearly an hour later, his own oxygen running out, Chaya stands, recites the Lord's Prayer, and walks away.

The next day, another Sherpa reaches the First Step. He radios that the man in the red boots is dead.

It's likely no one will ever know if David Sharp realized his dream and conquered the summit of Everest. He left no physical evidence there. His camera has disappeared. What is known is that Sharp is one of the latest, though most certainly not the last, victims of *Chomolungma*. His body will serve as a memorial to his determined and adventurous spirit—and to the risks for anyone who dares to reach for the sky.

Would You? Could You?

(Share your answers if you're reading in a group)

As vacation destinations go, the "Death Zone" on Everest will never rank very high—it's just about the most inhospitable place on the planet. Yet the more daring (some would say *crazy*) among us keep going there, and dying there. So what exactly is our obligation to our fellow man when we're standing in the middle of the jet stream? Do the rules of common human decency get suspended above, say, twenty-five thousand feet? Should anyone expect help in a place where one's own survival consumes every ounce of brain matter?

After David Sharp's demise, Max Chaya remembered, "When it was clear what state David was in—that he was much closer to death than to life—Russ [expedition leader Russell Brice, via radio] just told me, 'Max, we can't do anything. You have to come back down' . . . Russell had an obligation toward me because I'm his client. And he didn't want anyone else to jeopardize their life to try and save someone who's almost dead . . . I couldn't understand how I could

walk past a dying person while being myself in 100 percent mental and physical condition, without being able to help. But I understand now.”

Soon after the incident, critics from all points on the compass lined up to admonish the climbers who failed to attempt a rescue. Among them was Sir Edmund Hillary, who said that “Human life is far more important than just getting to the top of a mountain.” Sharp’s mother, on the other hand, didn’t blame anyone for her son’s death. She was quoted as saying, “Your only responsibility is to save yourself, not to try to save someone else.”

Talk is cheap. The question is: What would *you* do?

- If you were at twenty-seven thousand feet on Everest, fatigued and low on oxygen, *would you* stop to help a climber in distress?
- Some clients pay as much as \$65,000 for guides to lead them to Everest’s peak. If your life’s dream was to reach the top of the world—and if you’d emptied your bank account to make it happen—*could you* give up your dream for someone you didn’t know? Does your responsibility change if the person in trouble intentionally put himself at risk?
- Read the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. Jews and Samaritans were openly hostile toward each other at this time. Given those circumstances, how much risk did the Samaritan assume by stopping?
- Jesus said that the second of the two greatest commandments is “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). How great is your love for your “neighbor”? *Would you* honestly risk your life for him or her? What if it’s 90 percent likely that you’ll die in the attempt? Seventy-five percent likely? Fifty-fifty? Should your answer depend on whether you are single versus married with children at home?

- When Jesus says at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, “Go and do likewise,” does he mean that we should *always* stop to help someone in need? Jesus gave his life for us on the cross, yet during his ministry, when crowds gathered to experience his teaching and healing, he often withdrew to pray (Luke 5:15–16). Does this mean there are times when it’s appropriate *not* to help others?
- When has someone taken a personal risk—physical or otherwise—to help you during a crisis? How did you feel about that person’s actions? Have you ever been ready to or actually have put your life at risk for someone else? How did that make you feel about yourself?
- It takes a truckload of ambition to reach the top of Everest. How ambitious are you? In what areas of your life are you ambitious? When is ambition healthy and when is it not? Are you happy with the level of your ambition, or do you feel the need to ramp up or cut back? Why?

Reporting In

Are you struggling with any of these issues? It’s time to pray for guidance. Has God given you clear direction? It’s still time to pray!

Hitting the Trail

(This is just for you)

Most of us won’t be hiking up Everest anytime soon, so we probably won’t have to deal with a dying climber. Yet we know any number of people who are in distress. In some cases it’s obvious; in others, they try to hide it. Either way, for them, the crisis is real. So . . . what are you going to do about it?

- Make a list of people you know who might be in distress. They could be coworkers, neighbors, your children, or your wife. What are their issues? What do they need? What is your plan to do something about it? Write it down here.

- What situations are most likely to draw you in as a Good Samaritan? When are you least likely to step in? How is your reluctance in that area affecting your marriage or your relationships with others? What could you do to change that? Record it here.

- How often do you, like David Sharp, set out to take on an enormous obstacle on your own? Is this a strength or a flaw? If you're not sure—or if you're concerned about your answer—corner a buddy and talk it over.

New Territory

(For those who want to explore further)

Read *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer, the bestselling account of the 1996 Everest tragedy. Watch season one of the Discovery Channel series *Everest: Beyond the Limit*, which

was filmed at the same time as David Sharp's summit attempt and death on the mountain.

- Who are the “priests” and “Levites” and who are the “Good Samaritans” in these accounts? Do some people fall into both categories?
- How would you now judge the actions—or inactions—of the climbers on Everest during David Sharp's demise? How about David Sharp himself?