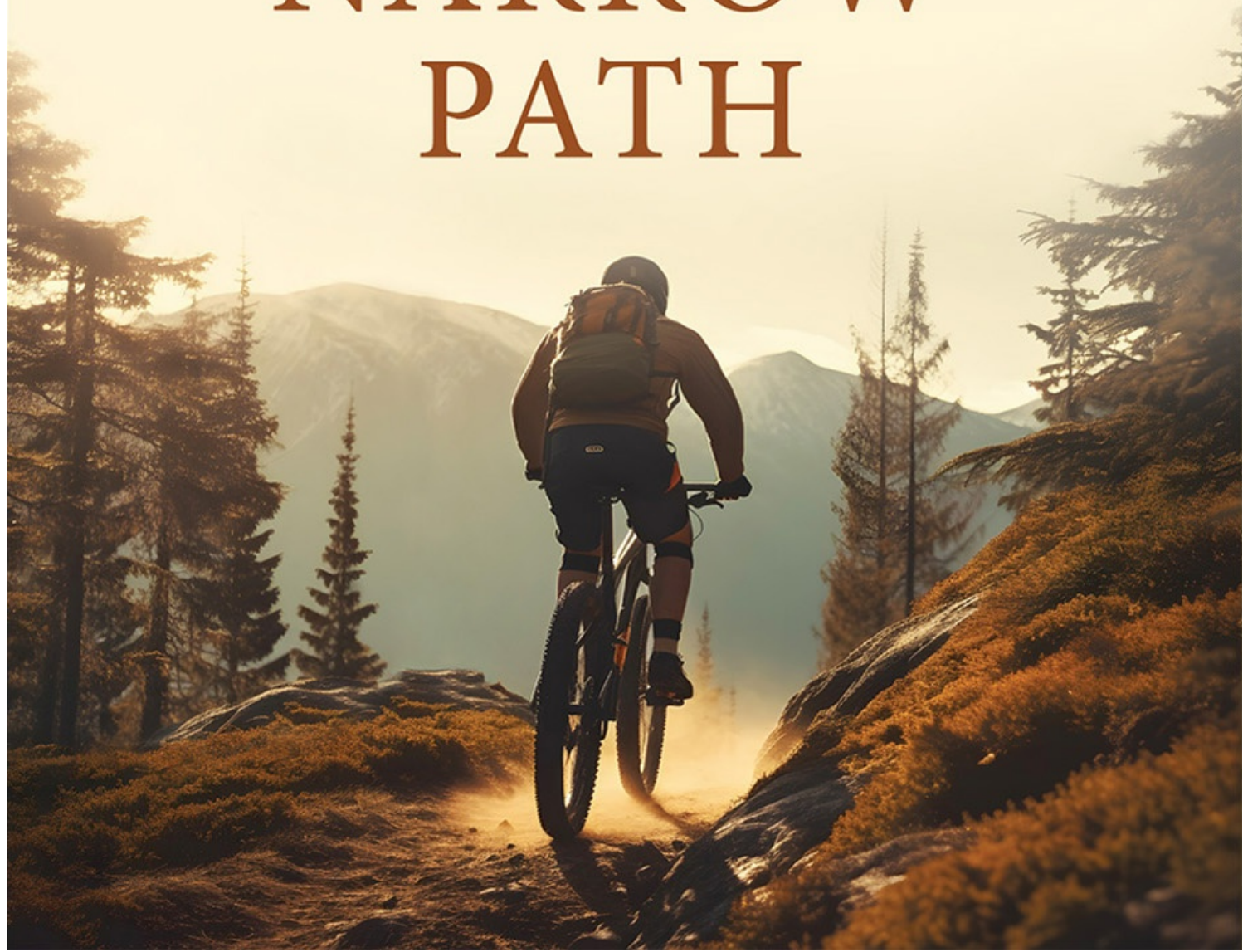


CLARK RICH BURBIDGE

A  
SAINT'S  
JOURNEY  
*on the*  
NARROW  
PATH



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# 1

## Dwelling on Obstacles

Mountain Biking requires a combination of conditioning, judgment, momentum, and balance. Biking on a narrow single track, which often has steep drop-offs just inches off the track, tests all these abilities often simultaneously. This particular narrow track ride is often made more technical by loose or fixed rocks and roots, several narrow bridges, and logs placed cross-trail to prevent erosion. These obstacles—along with hikers, dogs, joggers, and riders going both ways—require continuous vigilance.

The first true principle of mountain biking is not to dwell on the obstacles. This means that if there's something in the trail moving or stationary, loose or fixed, which your eyes or mind becomes focused on, your front tire will be drawn directly toward it. The experience can be particularly memorable if the fixation is the drop-off on the edge of the trail or a biker moving in the opposite direction. This means you hit what you stare at. And trust me, this is not a pleasant experience.

I remember following a twenty-something rider down two switchbacks near the bottom of the trail. Marking the inside of both these steep downhill turns are sturdy trees. In an effort to avoid the trail's edge as she attempted the downhill turn, she focused so hard on the inside of the switchbacks that she crashed, solidly impacting the tree trunks on both bends. She went over the handlebars both times into the tree. Following the first crash, I stopped to offer assistance and advice about this principle, but after the second one, she merely gave me an embarrassed look and waved me past. That's not something you see every day!

The result is often the same whether you have a lot of momentum or very little—you get to experience flying. Usually, the flight is a short one over the front of your handlebars and onto your helmet or upper back. It looks spectacular. All mountain bikers experience such flights eventually. Such an experience usually doesn't result in permanent damage if you have the proper safety equipment. A few moments on your back, mentally checking through all your body parts to make sure you're still in one piece, is a good idea before you try to pop back up. Perhaps a little first aid to stop some bleeding, a quick check to make sure your bike isn't damaged, and you're ready to go, hopefully a bit wiser.

### UNHEALTHY DWELLING

The life principle here is that it's often easier to focus on the negative. When we look in the mirror, our focus is inevitably drawn to our weaknesses and shortcomings. We

seem to obsess that we're too much of one thing or not enough of something else. We're too tall or short, our weight isn't right, we don't like our hair, and so on. Our blemishes may be all we see. Our clothes are not in style, or our body is not proportioned as we'd like. Our job isn't right, or those we care about don't respond as we think they should. There are endless ways we tear ourselves down. Just as in mountain biking, if we dwell on these negative aspects, that is what we'll become.

What do I mean? C. S. Lewis put it rather succinctly in the tenth of his fictional *Screwtape Letters* written from a senior devil to his apprentice nephew on how to handle their human subjects. He stated, "All mortals tend to turn into the thing they are pretending to be."<sup>1</sup> Simply, it is that we become comfortable with this kind of negative conversation, and others notice that we seem to be constantly unpleasant, tearing ourselves or others down or just dwelling on ourselves and creating a victim myth in our minds. Left unchecked, this can develop into an ever-accelerating downward spiral of self-esteem.

Unfortunately, those who begin to dwell on the negative do not stop with themselves; they frequently turn to tearing down others, often to protect their fragile self-image. I have known some who have fallen into this pattern and cannot seem to carry on a conversation without including in it someone else's embarrassing failure or weakness. No one really wants to be around such negative conversations. It pushes others away and then of course adds to the individual's downward, self-indulgent spiral. One serious trap associated with this self-victimization is to produce an atmosphere of helplessness in which no responsibility is taken. Everything becomes someone else's fault or is caused by circumstances or unfairness. What we're really telling ourselves is that it's out of our control. The subject of each conversation becomes lost in the trapped individual's growing obsession to prove there's nothing wrong with them and that it's not their fault. (This is discussed at length later in chapter 7.)

One of the telltale indicators of such dwelling is often a change in vocal tone. I call it the Eeyore voice. (I apologize for making you hear this in your head as you read.) You know the voice as Eeyore tells Christopher Robin, "I've lost my tail and I'll never find it again." Breaking out often requires us to dive into the Tigger voice, which promotes positivity. I'm sure you can also hear in your mind Tigger's voice. "The wonderful thing about Tiggers is Tiggers are wonderful things! Their tops are made out of rubber; their bottoms are made out of springs!" I bet you're smiling already! Never forget Tigger's greatest secret—he knows that he's unique. "The most wonderful thing about Tiggers is I'm the only one."<sup>2</sup>

He is just like each of you. You are also wonderful and one-of-a-kind. That means you are precious to your Heavenly Father.

Those caught in this self-defeating trap continue reinforcing the same behavior expecting things to change. They're unable to appreciate that they have the power to change their behavior and produce a different outcome. I remember counseling a young man on this subject a few years ago. I explained to him that he was like a person sitting in a car with a blown transmission. Things weren't working out when he pushed the gas, so his solution was to push even harder on the gas and refuse any help from the mechanic. The result was that he wasted gas and got nowhere. Pursuing the same detrimental behavior more aggressively only uses up more energy without producing a positive result. Unfortunately, this course leads to frustration, anger, and bitterness, which in turn leads

to hate and finally personal destruction (as described more completely in chapter 6). This is a wide and well-worn path. Taking responsibility for your own acts or your role in a particular outcome, regardless of how embarrassing or stressful it might be, is empowering. This is a basic step in both repentance and overcoming.

## THE BETTER FOCUS

There is another way. The Apostle Paul counseled the Corinthians about seeing through a glass darkly (see 1 Corinthians 13:9–12). We learn from his letter that we must see ourselves as God sees us and put away childish things. He tells us that drawing closer to the Savior and seeking to see life as it really is, using revelation and truth, will allow us to grow from seeing in part to seeing perfectly. One day, we will see God face-to-face and know ourselves as He knows us. Paul further tells us that we may proceed from glory to glory, thus gaining ever-greater insight and understanding until we see as we are seen and receive a fulness of God's glory in His kingdom (see 2 Corinthians 3:18). Through Joseph Smith, the Lord has stated that this would occur when we stand with Him, having received a fulness of His glory in the celestial kingdom (see Doctrine and Covenants 76:94, 96).

Pursuing this path then allows us to stand in front of that same mirror and learn to see ourselves as God sees us. He sees beyond our frailties and weaknesses, and we can too. When the Lord told Samuel the prophet to go to the house of Jesse, because He had prepared the next king of Israel from among Jesse's sons, Samuel obeyed. Jesse called each son before Samuel. The great prophet initially assumed that the next king was to be the eldest son, Eliab, because he looked the part. The Lord's answer was instructive for Samuel as well as us. In explaining that it was to be the youngest son, David, the Lord said, "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature . . . for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). David was brought in from the fields, and though he didn't look the part, Samuel knew he was to be the next king and anointed him, "and the spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward" (1 Samuel 16:13).

We are God's children, loved beyond measure. He is always there for us and has created this existence to allow us to become like Him and return to His presence. It's a process that requires striving, desire, and sincerity rather than perfection. By practicing this, we begin to understand what He sees when He looks at us, and we can dwell on the positive of who we are rather than who we've been. We also then break out of the natural man's tendency to dwell on the past and are able to focus on becoming something more.

There's another interesting side-effect of this kind of thinking. As we think of ourselves differently, we also begin to see others differently. We begin to see others as God sees them, which allows us to more easily feel charity or the pure love of Christ, which, not by accident, is also spoken of in the same chapter of Corinthians as being "the greatest of these" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

You can't avoid the obstacles you're dwelling on. They become part of you. Dwell on things that, as they become part of you, will lift you up, empower you, and make you a better person. It will draw others to you as they sense that spirit of charity you carry. Make yourself the kind of person such that anyone who crosses your path during the day will be grateful for having done so.

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (HarperCollins, 2001), 50.
2. “The Wonderful Thing About Tiggers,” Fandom, accessed Nov. 11, 2024,  
[https://pooh.fandom.com/wiki/The\\_Wonderful\\_Thing\\_About\\_Tiggers](https://pooh.fandom.com/wiki/The_Wonderful_Thing_About_Tiggers).

## 2 Focusing Ahead

To access the Mueller Park Trail, you must cross a bridge from the parking lot. There are six more bridges between this spot and Big Rock. The bridge has several two-by-six boards running the length of it for strength and a six-inch drop-off at the end. Staying on the boards and executing a little hop at the end is helpful in avoiding your first little surprise of the trip. This skill comes into play later as you attempt to avoid obstacles and stay on the narrow track or one of the narrow bridges. The trick to riding in a relatively narrow straight line is not to look down at the line itself or even at the front of your tire. I don't know the physics or physiology of it, but bringing your focus too close to the front of your tire dramatically affects your balance. I believe it diminishes your brain's perspective of the environment and therefore results in an inability to balance and maintain a straight course.

Experience has taught me on many different trails that what works best is keeping the center of my focus about fifteen to twenty feet beyond my front tire and using my peripheral vision to pick up the closer-in details as well as the farther-out details. Of course, a biker never stares at one spot—they're always shifting their field of vision, looking around quickly, and maintaining awareness. But the center of that range of movement and view always comes back to the location mentioned.

### FOCUS AND PERSPECTIVE

This focus allows you to anticipate and correct. It allows you to avoid problems and adjust gears as necessary. It creates perspective and balance. All these benefits mean that you can maintain momentum without unnecessary mishaps.

In life, focusing ahead allows you many of the same advantages. We humans tend to act without considering the consequences, or if we recognize the possibility of a negative result, we're quick to discount it as being unlikely to happen to us. This short-term view of life is often referred to as a desire for immediate gratification or simply being shortsighted. This is a view that opens us up to the influence of Satan. It's not the big compromises we make in life that usually steer us away from our eternal goals; it is a series of small deviations that pull us ever farther off course. Virtually all selfish activity, bitterness, hate, indulgence, immorality, self-indulgence, rationalization of things that we know in our hearts are wrong, and other acts that pollute our spirits, our bodies, and our lives consist of a series of small errors or justifications. When taken by themselves, they may seem benign. However, when seen as a connected process, it's clear where they lead.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, the senior and more experienced devil, Screwtape, gives counsel to his young nephew, an apprentice devil named Wormwood, on how to effectively do his job with his specific human “patient.” He says in one of his letters, “You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember . . . it does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. . . . Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”<sup>3</sup>

This illustrates a second important principle: Anyone who begins to fall under the influence of the adversary or his minions will gradually be robbed of the joy and satisfaction of accomplishing anything worthwhile. They will have access to enjoyment of all the good and uplifting aspects of their life steadily drained away and replaced by “nothing.” Examples include the loss of warm relations with friends and family who love and care for them, good health, a desire to serve and grow, involvement in religious devotion, interest in a spiritually and physically healthy lifestyle, enjoyment of wholesome and uplifting activities, and the satisfaction and positive reinforcement that comes with achievement (from good grades, positive reviews at work, or involvement in something that took much effort and has had a very positive result).

The adversary also robs them of the rest that comes with a clear conscience and a life free from the constant and ever-increasing burden of guilt, shame, addiction, or obsession. People often lose motivation to strive, to achieve, and to do their best and even the ability to care.

There can also be a growing tendency to objectify others, treating them as objects that have no right to feel, express opinions, share thoughts, or experience negative impacts from offensive behavior. In short, people around the afflicted individual are not seen as people with rights, needs, or a voice. Screwtape states in the same letter, “He [the human] must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading right away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space.”<sup>4</sup>

The adversary does not need to get us to take one huge fatal step. He accomplishes the same with distraction from that which is good, leading to a lessening of our interest in positive pursuits and then taking from us all the things that are “something” in our lives and replacing them with “nothing.”

“Nothing” doesn’t mean empty or a complete void. Such emptiness will always be filled with something. This “nothing” includes those things that serve no positive or productive purpose—behavior that drags us down, like obsessions with computer gaming, music, or various other media that can isolate us from others, addicting substances or behaviors, or obsessions with “things” instead of loved ones.

## SATAN’S ISOLATION TACTICS

This is particularly insidious when it comes to the damage done by the adversary to our spirituality. People with such burdens too often cut themselves off from the community of their ward or family under the counterfeit idea that organized religion is somehow corrupt or hurtful. This most often comes from a difficult experience with one

member that is then generalized to the entire ward or Church. Satan then replaces this with a cobbled-together, obscure “spirituality” that consists of picking and choosing traits and practices as if the gospel is a Las Vegas buffet. So those afflicted choose what fits into their chosen lifestyle and reject that which is inconvenient or uncomfortable. The result is a feel-good mishmash that may work when the sun is shining but will be dashed to pieces when storms occur in our lives. Satan always sets us up to fail and desires that when we fail, we take as many people with us as possible. The scriptures are replete with stupendous examples of Satan refusing to support his followers at the last day (see Alma 30:60).

Such things do no more than pointlessly fill time or provide selfish gratification. “Nothing” can also include the replacement of our positive human associations with counterfeit friendships with those who use us to justify their own insecurities or acts. As alluded to in another of Screwtape’s letters, the goal is to give us “an ever-increasing craving for an ever-diminishing pleasure.”<sup>3</sup> (See also Alma 44.) Why do so many slide into such an abyss? Satan knows that once he has taken from us “everything” we once valued and cherished—that lifted us up and made us feel joy—and replaced it with “nothing,” we will accept “anything” he offers because it is “something.”

This also works the other way. It is the small, good things we do—the slight corrections as we focus ahead—that make all the difference. The scriptures are replete with examples and counsel encouraging us to appreciate the power of small, positive acts. (We will discuss this at more length in the next chapter.)

As we focus ahead and keep life in perspective, we are then able to more easily recognize, anticipate, and avoid the difficulties that cause problems along the trail. Our life continues to be something of value, and we consistently build upon the positive choices and acts that bring strength, purpose, and happiness. Now *that* is a trail that leads us somewhere worth going. There’s nothing worse than spending large amounts of time getting to a place that, when you arrive, you discover wasn’t worth the effort. On the other hand, there’s nothing more satisfying than working to achieve new heights of worthwhile spiritual, physical, emotional, or mental accomplishment and discovering the view from the mountain peak upon which you have arrived. That’s worth every step along the way.

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3. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (HarperCollins, 2001), 60–61.

4. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 57.

5. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 43.

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