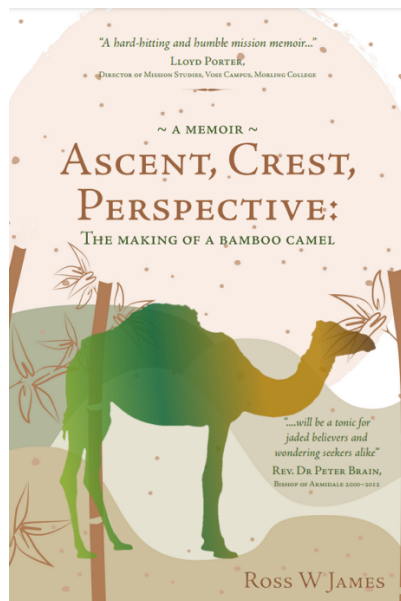


Ascent, Crest, Perspective: the making of a bamboo camel

By Ross James

Ark House Press, 2021, 290 pages



Summary

This is not a text book on Christian mission. It is a truly authentic and vulnerable reflection of someone's dependence on Providence to maintain a steadfast life when faced with adversity as a missionary. It's not often that we get a memoir that discusses the professional, family and personal struggles of a missionary. Reviewers have acclaimed it as: a hard-hitting and humble mission memoir; it drips with a perspective that comes from having climbed the mountain but reflected with honesty and humility; **highlights the significance of resilience and steadfastness** in a challenging world where life and projects don't always turn out the way we want.

With wit, humour and a good deal of self-deprecation, Dr Ross James reflects on an Ascent, a 20-year period of preparation as a journalist, academic and researcher, and missionary. Preparation levelled out on a Crest of purpose, decades leading initiatives to develop community-centred media projects throughout Asia in hard-to-access contexts.

In Perspective, Ross delves into 40 years of personal journals and correspondence to reflect on how Providence was at work in his life to overcome his limitations. His startling conclusion is that he is, after all, a bamboo camel, designed with specifications to fulfil a providential purpose.

Best illustration

The author describes how a small leisure boat was fixed by anchors to weather a storm.

"As the storm pounds the coast all day, the boat rises and lifts, and twists and strains against the anchor chains, but it is safe. [It is] an instructive analogy to answer the question: How did I achieve what I did despite the remorseless cycles of clinical depression that my journals reveal in the years before diagnosis? Providence designed me, I believe, with specifications to face storms rather than retreat from them, and with anchors to hold me fast within the tolerances and specifications I was designed to withstand."

Best Idea

Resilience is about harnessing mental, emotional, and psychological resources to adapt to or recover from sources of stress. However, people are never the same after such experiences. In fact, resilience research shows that many do not bounce back or spring back to their *original state* after a crisis. A necessary partner to resilience is steadfastness, a response to adversity with an unshakable core, unwavering and firm in purpose. Steadfastness acknowledges that, although we may never be complete again after adversity, 'the pieces that are left are complete and they are enough'.

Our Recommendation

The book is a must-read for mission students, and candidate missionaries undergoing preparation for service and their supporters and mission committees. It's honest and realistic and a delight to read. It highlights the significance of resilience and steadfastness in a challenging world of mission where life and projects don't always turn out the way we want. This well-crafted memoir highlights the hardships and joys of life committed to service. It is beautifully constructed around the central theme of Providence, drawing attention to the reality that God can use each stage of life whether failure, disappointment, or success, as preparation for what comes next.

Excerpts from the Introduction

At the time Jill and I married our expectations were for me to resume a career as a funeral director. Instead, we lived and worked in four Asian countries, and I worked on projects in 20 or so other nations. The urging of people to write about the experiences that occurred in a 40-year period of our lives was easy to dismiss because I always felt that when I get to the end of my life, and should I ever have achieved anything, then it would be obvious to anyone that Providence did it. But then I took a long walk. During a life-work transition I walked with Jill on the world class Bibbulmun Track in Australia, all 1,000 kilometres of it. The synthesis of hiking and stimuli to reflect on life's experiences coalesced into a realisation that maybe a narrative based on journals I wrote during a period of my life could be of interest to others.

...

God is explained as Providence (with a capital P) 'conceived as the power sustaining and guiding human destiny'[1] who will uphold, guide and care (Psalm 103:19) through works of providence (lower-case p). Providence. I like the word, even though it's infrequently used nowadays and unfamiliar to many. Providence. I like the sound of the rolling three syllables that simultaneously identifies God as a tangible force of divine guidance or care and explains the sustaining performances of providence

...

John Flavel was a 17th century English clergyman and prolific author. Flavel wrote a book about Providence. Flavel strongly implored people to keep a written record of the workings of providence in their lives. As it happened, I had been keeping journals for some 40 years. Only when I made systematic and comprehensive deep dives into my own writings for this book did I uncover previously unrecognised blessings. It is impossible to perceive our lives from one of thousands of events. On the other hand, it is possible to discern the beautiful history when we put them together. A review of journals and correspondence brought together perspectives that made it possible for my life to be understood.

...

My intention is for the dominant theme to be an account of the works of providence. The line of tension I navigate is not only to achieve that theme by reflection and self-

examination but also to avoid self-indulgence. I certainly do not want to make the mistake of convincing or deluding myself that what happened to me was in some way remarkable when in fact it wasn't. With such caveats, then, I offer revelations about being human. Some revelations are vulnerable honesty. There are patterns of despair but also hope, sadness but also joy, and discontent but also fulfilment.

...
Although the decision to write was made while bushwalking, don't look for metaphors, similes, or analogies of trudging a path with ups and downs, or of journeying through dense bush or landscapes of grassy fields. All I did was take a long walk, contemplate what people had suggested, and make a decision. Walking up a mountain is the only hiking analogy I use and that is to separate the book into three parts. Part 1, *Ascent*, covers about 20 years of *preparation* and wondering, What next? At the end of that ascent or preparation, I was ready for what was revealed at the crest. Part 2, *Crest*, briefly outlines about 20 years of the next stage of the journey. Here is certainty and *purpose*. Part 3, *Perspective* reflects on the ascent and crest in an attempt to understand what happened and how it happened. It is a reflection on how Providence turned preparation into purpose.

Best Quotes

"At the time of deciding to write the memoir I thought I remembered enough of my life to create a simple narrative. Instead, when journals and correspondence were reviewed, I discovered repetitive themes that reframed my interpretation of events. Those themes are necessary perspectives because they provide balance to what occurred on the ascent and at the crest."

"Progress is accompanied by hindrances to overcome, new skills learned through exertions the terrain demands, decisions made because of crisis, and after lengthy endeavour filled with uncertainty—but always hope—breakthrough to a place of confidence for decisions made and the ability to continue."

"My process of self-examination here is . . . interested in a perspective that helps me to understand the impact on me of the life I had. I do so, inspired by the 17th century clergyman, John Flavel, who argued that people with time and ability ought to journal or document the work of Providence in their lives for their own benefit and that of others. Such an undertaking is fraught with self-deceiving hubris and error. But I am willing to take that risk because four themes give me insight and perspective on how Providence shaped me: design, anchorage, steadfastness, and the cost of living outside of the comfort zone."

"My journals track ongoing cycles of [declining mental health] recorded across years. It is painful reading, attested in excerpts drawn from many years of journal entries: *Feeling down . . . have the pain and struggles been worth it; what have I achieved?* . . . These are but a few of many observations and comments repeated time and again over a decade. When reading them my first thought was, How did people, especially my family, put up with me? A second thought was, How did I achieve what I did in this condition?"

"From different times those selected incidents might be, but they illustrate a continuous lack of self-realisation and wisdom to recognise the symptoms of being driven by stress and not taking time to shut down and turn off. It was wearying and exhausting. And it was frustrating, but the more frustrated I was the more frustrated I became. . . . How could I think my way out of a problem when the problem was the way I thought?"

"The greatest conflict has been in my soul. I so much want to obey the first commandment—to love the Lord our God—through disciplined prayer, meditation, and

scripture, and also the second commandment—to love others—through time for family, life–work balance, and to gift the family with roots (tradition) and wings (future vision). I want to win the private battles (the first commandment) in order to win the public war (the second commandment).”

“A final perspective is from the position of a person who walked the Way of Jesus and who begged for relief from a condition. Whether it was a physical, mental, or spiritual condition we don’t know. This man, Paul, wisely learned to live with the promise that God’s grace, not healing, was the strength that would overcome his weakness or impediments caused by his condition. Paul even wrote: ‘So I wouldn’t get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations’ (2 Corinthians 12:9–10) [MSG]. I’m inclined to think my depression has been a ‘gift’ because it forced me to depend on Providence.”

“Clinical depression compelled me to depend on Providence’s design (aptitudes to fulfil a purpose) and anchorage (to hold me fast and steady). Those anchors were a distinguishable consistency in the works of providence, longing and yearning, confirmation of scripture, and companions who brought resources, experience, and wisdom to a common purpose.”

“Douglas Moo helpfully explains, ‘hypomoné (steadfastness) is not a meek, passive submission to circumstances but a strong, active, response’. Steadfastness is not fatalism, not a passive submission to whatever happens or to what comes one’s way in life. Our response to Providence is an active one, not swerving from a purpose.”

“Resilience is commonly thought of as being a form of emotional or psychological elasticity. . . . However, people are never the same after such experiences. In fact, resilience research shows that many do not bounce back or spring back to their *original state* after a crisis. . . . Although perseverance is commonly identified as the partner to resilience . . . [p]erseverance can be defined as a steady course of action despite setbacks, whereas steadfastness is unwavering and firm in purpose . . . a response to adversity with ‘an unshakable core’. Despair is not present here; quite the opposite, for steadfastness acknowledges that, although we may never be complete again after adversity, ‘the pieces that are left are complete and they are enough’.”

“To be steadfast is to be firm, unwavering. I would have acknowledged there were times and places and storms throughout the ascent and crest from which I didn’t flee and instead embraced the struggle (James 1:2) but I didn’t recognise that as steadfastness. For all that, I can identify times when I certainly was not buoyant, when my design was tested beyond tolerance. Medication restored the body’s depleted resources of chemicals linked to depression, but too much travel, too much work, and too much stress periodically overwhelmed medication and dragged me into frustration and despair. Indeed, I recognise that in my case steadfastness—as with any character trait—could sometimes be an asset and sometimes a liability, sometimes salt, sometimes pepper.”

“Steadfastness should never be mistaken as stubbornness or obduracy. To be unwavering is *not* to be immovable. Steadfastness *allows* for movement or change in response to conditions that are no longer valid, and yet still remain unwavering and aligned to an unchanging end purpose.”

“A second caveat, and I emphasise this, is that if any characteristics of steadfastness are identified in my life, it is only because of the sustaining hand of providence. I permit myself to entertain the idea that depression was a gift that rendered me incomplete. I’m not complete, but design, anchors and steadfastness hold together the pieces that are left. That is enough for Providence. That is enough for me.”

“I’m of the opinion there are two types of corruption. *Bribery* obtains a service that is illegal in some way, whereas an official who demands payment for a service that their office ought to fulfil as a matter of course commits *extortion*. . . . I acknowledge

corruption characterised by systematic criminal activity such as bribery and extortion. The seriousness and illegality of such practices is not to be minimised. However, in my experience the average law-abiding person doesn't engage in corruption but does occasionally take advantage of opportunities to accumulate a small benefit. This is, admittedly, a contentious topic, but I have formulated what I believe to be a fitting description for such practices after observing how it works. I call it, *micro-level entrepreneurial unofficial privatisation*."

"But we can always be certain a plan exists because of what we have seen God do previously and with consistent patterns of leading. When anything has been tested and judged by former experience the more easily it is believed, received, and practiced when it occurs again. Anchored by that certainty, steadfastness is sustained through difficult periods."

"I see design qualities and tolerances in the bamboo and the camel that reflect observations people have prayed over me and noticed about me, and perspectives I now have about myself. Versatility and steadfastness in tough environments made it possible to venture into places others did not want to go. Sometimes those places were physical locations or situations, sometimes they were conceptual places, ideas and methods others were yet to recognise or understand. There were times of simply plodding through deserts of discouragement and frustration, yearning for oases of emotional refreshment, but always with confidence that Providence was at work. If Providence felt the need to make an incomplete bamboo camel for such purposes, then I am content."

Amazon Books

<https://www.amazon.com/Ascent-Crest-Perspective-making-bamboo-ebook/dp/B09L53CBF3>

Book website

<https://thebamboocamel.com.au/>