

FAITH ON THE ROPES



by Eli Knapp

The rope bridge lay before me like a tightrope. Underneath the scorching sun flowed the muddy Grumeti River, a swirling milk-chocolate brown. But the river below didn't harbor anything nearly so pleasant. The river was an eerie abode for hippopotamuses, crocodiles and pythons. Proving this fact was one massive crocodile who dozed on the bank with his jaws agape, just 25 meters downriver.

The bridge was supported by two narrow cables—each with a diameter of less than a dime—that creaked and groaned under the slightest pressure. Time-weathered boards spread out at uneven intervals forced one to look down and step carefully. Thin

rope handrails came only waist high. Small piles of baboon excrement lay on the boards like landmines, as if daring a careless footfall.

I didn't have to cross the bridge. There was nothing on the other side that I needed. But the bridge was there. And so was I.

For all I knew, the bridge was safe. It had been built here in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park in order to transport supplies to the Grumeti River Camp, a remote safari lodge built for tourists. The bridge was for those few times a year when the river flooded, after the torrential East African monsoons.

Today I hadn't come with supplies. Nor had I come alone. Eight of us, including my wife

and two nieces—Mary, age seven, and Christina, age five—had sought out this spot merely to see this legendary bridge.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't motivate myself to cross the bridge. Excuses dribbled over me like the sweat on my forehead. A foot could get stuck between the boards. I could slip. I could get dizzy and lose my balance. The unknowns were just as bad. When had the bridge been made? And by whom? Had it ever been inspected?

Certainly, to cross this bridge required more faith than I possessed. As if mocking me, the cabled bridge swung in the breeze ever so gently, like a hammock in summer, belying the pernicious dangers that lurked below.

I stood rooted to the land, as if my feet were encased in fast-drying cement. But not so with the feet of my nieces. Mary and Christina buzzed right past me. Without a moment's hesitation, they stepped out on the walkway over air as if out for a routine walk down the sidewalk. To them, this bridge was just another playground, a small feat to be conquered before moving on to something else. Although they had never tested the bridge, they believed in it. Furthermore, even though they had never met the maker of the bridge, they had faith in his work. Why was my faith so lacking while my little nieces' faith was absolute?

I could not let myself be outdone. At more than twice their collective age, my virile pride took over. Tentatively I stepped out, grimacing as I saw how termites had beaten me to some of the planks underfoot.

Despite the noonday heat, an involuntary shiver ran down my spine. Just a quarter of the way out, the doubt-laden "what ifs" took over. What if the planks broke under all our weight? Or the cables pulled away from the banks? What if the bridge tipped sideways? Hesitating, I peered down at the murky river. On cue, a crocodile head, which I had mistaken for a floating log, suddenly submerged directly underneath me.

Mary chose this moment to call out. "Eli, come on! What are you waiting for?!" I had no answer. And I couldn't let her see her uncle so fearful. Clutching the handrails I nervously started out. With each step, the tenuous bridge sagged and moaned.

As Mary and Christina completed the crossing, I gained confidence and crossed the middle mark. But my journey wasn't over. About three-fourths of the way, the makers of the bridge apparently ran out of planks. To make up for this, the planks were simply placed farther apart. Spaces between could now swallow a foot or even a leg. To me, it had become a

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minefield demanding I delicately maneuver each foot to continue. If I stopped, I was sure fear would paralyze me altogether.

Smack!

I froze mid-stride and glanced down to see a dozing crocodile leave his spot on the sandy bank and plunge headlong into the river. I shuddered as the tip of the croc's massive tail melted into the river flowing just a few yards beneath me.

Regaining composure I moved on, watching with relief as the opposite bank finally drew nearer.

Then it dawned on me. Many times in life we need to advance with a degree of caution. But there comes a point, especially in our spiritual journey, when we have to throw caution aside. We have to move out where there are no visible guarantees. We have to cross the divide. Accepting God's salvation requires a leap of faith. If so, why not do so with merriment and joy?

Not yet 30 years old, I can think too much. Maybe I've gone to school too long, and much learning has made me too cautious.

Consider Mark 10: 15-16: "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them."

Like my nieces Mary and Christina, I need to trust the bridge and have faith in its Maker.

Solid ground never felt as good on my feet as it did that sweltering June day. Happiness flowed over me as my accomplishment dawned. Yet a far greater accomplishment is in store for those that have faith. Though the metaphorical river we are currently crossing over may not be full of crocs and hippos, the dangers lurking around us are just as real.

Fortunately, our bridge has passed the test and stands secure. Let us have merriment and joy in crossing it. For Jesus Christ's carrying capacity is unlimited. □

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