



Life's Lava Tubes

It was dark—darker than a black hole in an abandoned coal mine at midnight. My family, a few friends and I were exploring the Ape Caves—2,000-year-old lava tubes on the south flank of Mt. St. Helens in southwest Washington State. Back then in the 1980s this site was relatively unimproved—no lights, guides, eateries, gift shops or other touristy things. Just a gravel parking lot, and a hole in the ground with a ladder. I think there was a U.S. Forest Service sign warning us that we were entering the cave at our own risk. So we cautiously descended into the abyss, carrying our flashlights and lanterns.

Lava tubes are formed when molten lava flows through a hardened crust and then empties, leaving behind a long underground tunnel. Some of these formations can be wide enough for a subway train. But as we scrambled over chunks of collapsed ceiling, making our way through the tube, it grew narrower and narrower. Eventually, we had to crouch over, scraping our heads on jagged outcrops. Finally, the conduit tapered down to nothing. At that point I recall a wave of claustrophobia before we turned back toward the entry point.

Some years after our adventure, one of our neighbors took her own life. She had fallen into a dark depression, and could see no way out. In retrospect, a psychologist who lived down the street observed that depression can make a person feel enclosed in an ever-narrowing tunnel with no options. The challenge of friends and counselors, he said, is to help the person see that there are always choices—even when it seems the tunnel is ending without a twinkle of light. Listening to his explanation, I couldn't help but remember the feeling I had years earlier at the end of that lava tube.

In the last couple of years, circumstances have confined many of us to our own homes—virtually imprisoned in our own living rooms. With viruses, virulent politics, violence, and a volatile economy, it's safe to say that these years have been fertile ground for end-of-lava-tube experiences—dire situations with

seemingly no options and no way out. In such a tight spot, we can be tempted to jump headlong down any hole that looks like it may offer an escape. We can fall for conspiracy theories, odd religious ideas, cultic teachings and charismatic demagogues—things that will ultimately constrict and imprison us even more. Worse yet, we may begin to think that God himself has somehow brought us to this point to punish, humiliate us or make us suffer.

But the truth is that God is not in the business of confining us in deep, dark holes—whether they are of our own making or imposed on us by situations beyond our control. In fact, he always offers to lead us out of darkness and confinement into his glorious light and wide, open spaces, because *“where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”* (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Scary though they may be, end-of-lava-tube experiences can be great learning moments where we discover that we are not (and don't need to be) in total control of our own destiny. They can prompt us to rethink our assumptions, do some creative problem solving and seek advice. They can even prompt us to begin a more serious conversation with God, who will open our eyes to the possibilities around us.

In the final analysis, end-of-lava-tube experiences are illusions. There are always options, even though they might be so hard to see at the time. Even if it actually is the end of a tunnel, we still have a choice of how to react, and we still have the absolute guarantee of eternal life.

The Apostle Paul was an old hand at prayerfully navigating tight, dark spots. Here's what he had to say about it: *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed”* (2 Corinthians 4:7-9). Yes, there is bright light at the end of that lava tube! □

—Monte Wolverton