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ESCAPE TO THE DEPTHS OF GOD

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“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.’ But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.” (Jonah 1:1-3)

Many believers can identify with this well-known story of Jonah, which describes a problem woven through the history of God’s people. Rather than obeying God’s

instructions, they often run from Him and destroy His original plan for their life.

This escape is not necessarily an escape into sin or backsliding from God; it can often be characterized as an escape from God’s original will for our lives. Regardless of whether or not we are involved in our churches, serving in various ministries, or successful in our careers, it does not necessarily mean

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that we are in God's will and that we have His favor. I believe the reason for this is a misunderstanding of the word *success*. We imply the following by this concept: a sign of success is when our church has big numbers, materialistic stability, or offers good career positions and wages. However, true success does not necessarily mean quantity rather quality. Because we may succeed in a certain way does not mean that we have fulfilled God's plan for us.

Jonah knew that God had a specific plan. God had told him, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." (Jonah 1:2) The city was on the "enemy's" side and did not seem to him to be the wisest destination. Rather than obeying God by going to the east, Jonah decided to run from God as far as he could – to Tarshish. "But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD." (Jonah 1:3) In the original Hebrew it states that he fled from "God's presence",

which actually confirms that Jonah wanted to escape from God's perfect will.

Every time when we flee God's will, whether because of fear or hardheadedness, it will lead us to a more difficult situation. Not only are we not where we ought to be, or what we ought to be, we do this all apart from God's presence. God does not simply want to bless our plans for a life with Him, rather He wants His plan for our life.

Such are not necessarily ashamed of the Lord. They do not hide because they are Christians or His servants. When the Lord caused a storm to arise because of Jonah's disobedience, and when the ship's staff awoke him to ask him who he was, without hesitation he said, "I [am] a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry [land]." (Jonah 1:9) Such believers in fact may be proud of their position in God, the works they do for Him, or the sacrifices they've made but are still void of proof that they live according to God's perfect plan for their life.

1. ALL WHO FLEE FROM GOD IN THIS WAY TURN TOWARD HIS DEPTHS.

✦ **God does not simply want to bless our plans for a life with Him, rather He wants His plan for our life.**

I believe that God's dark depths exist, which are not necessarily of the devil or the result of our battles, rather are intended for all who love God but who have fled from His

will. They help us to turn us back to the right path. When Jonah was thrown from the ship, in order to calm the storm, the Word says that “the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah.” (Jonah 1:17a)

God prepared a great fish in order to stop Jonah from fleeing. God often prepares these kinds of dark surroundings in order to stop us from failure caused by our self-willed thinking. According to the Apostle Paul, self-willed thinking is a sign of the old way of life. He wrote the following in regards to the unbeliever, “Among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.” (Ephesians 2:3) Unfortunately, many look at Christianity as a springboard for success. Many even look at churches as a place to realize their success; if they were unsuccessful in the world.

Yet, new birth and life with Christ is not a foundation for supernatural realization of our own ambitions and desires or for building our own ego, rather for knowing and doing His will. In my personal experience I know how many times I have experienced various life storms simply because I did not cleave to the revelation of God’s Word or because I went toward my call or my vision for my own personal life. After finishing my studies I came to a church where ignorance and

resistance to change led the church; and while knowing my call I thought that it would be best to go somewhere in mission work and therefore complete my studies somewhere away from Croatia.

But thank God He prevented me with a problem that I had with my leg, and because of rehabilitation I had to stay in Zagreb. If it had not been for God’s dark depths I would have already received my doctorate and been far from God’s call for my life. Inside I was lost, knowing that I was running from the plan God had for me.

God prepares these kinds of difficult situations that save from ourselves. Although, at first it may seem like a satanic attack in the shape of a fish, as in the case of Jonah, but God is the one who prepared it all ahead of time in order to save Jonah. We can be sure that these preparations and God’s depths arise from His love for us. The writer of Hebrews confirms this for us when he says, “For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.” (Hebrews 12:6) These depths can be manifest in various

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ways, for example by a discharge notice from work, sickness or simply in situations where we are not successful in an arena we suppose has been given to us by God. It seems that God has stopped us with His own hand in the one place from which we cannot extract ourselves.

These depths of God also can look desperate and discouraging so much so that sometimes we may feel rejected by God, as Jonah did when he said, "The waters surrounded me, [even] to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head." (Jonah 2:5)

I believe that in these moments these feelings are given for the purpose of opening our eyes to the poor state of our escape. Many times we will only begin to once more seek His face when we've hit rock bottom. Rather than firmly holding on and nurturing our relationship with God, that relationship is often undisciplined and unhealthy, which is why many come to know Him only in the midst of crisis.

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In these moments of desperation God wishes to break us of our hardheadedness amidst recognizing that our strength and life are waning because we are fleeing from His presence. Every work that is not covered by God's presence is doomed to fail. This is why the Bible says that, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who try build it." (Psalm 127:1a)

This dark condition is very hard, as Jonah described, "The waters surrounded me, [even] to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head... The earth with its bars [closed] behind me forever." (Jonah 2:5 & 6b)

Have you ever found yourself in this kind of situation; when you have just had enough; when you find yourself in deep debt, desperate or in depression wondering if it is worth it to be a Christian, if all your efforts were in vain, whether to continue in surrender or to simply quit because it seemed that there is no other way out?

2. WHEN WE FIND OURSELVES IN THESE DARK DEPTHS WE DO NOT NEED TO DESPAIR, RATHER JUST TURN TO GOD.

The mistake we often make in that moment is that we begin fleeing or distancing ourselves from other believers and the church thinking that God has simply left

us and that there is no grace left for us. In error, many people forsake the Lord rather than turning to Him and crying out to Him in prayer, or they simply allow the storms of life to carry them wherever they please.

A second group, not wishing to be broken, begins living all the more aimlessly and so ultimately choose disastrous human solutions, such as finding a new partner who is better than the first, taking out second loan to pay the first, making a decision that violates their principles thinking that it will bring temporary help. The third will even punish themselves, returning to their old sin not believing that such things happen if they follow Jesus.

In a time of desperation Jonah said, “And my prayer went [up] to You, Into Your holy temple.” (Jonah 2:7b) He did what every believer ought to do – he turned his focus from himself onto God!

In Solomon’s prayer to the Lord for sanctification of the temple in 1 Kings we clearly see the purpose of the temple – to be a place where people could find help through prayer and crying out to God. Solomon said that if God’s people were beaten by the enemy because of sin, if the heavens were shut, or “When there is famine in the land, pestilence [or] blight [or] mildew, locusts [or] grasshoppers; when

their enemy besieges them in the land of their cities; whatever plague or whatever sickness [there is]; whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, [or] by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men)... that Your eyes may be open to the supplication of Your servant and the supplication of Your people Israel, to listen to them whenever they call to You.” (1 Kings 8:37-39, 52)

This is the answer for coming out from God’s depths; from under the pressure that weighs on the heart that weighs down the

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church, pressure felt on the job and in the home. Prayer, crying out and turning to God are the foundations of our life.

While prayer is a simple thing, we can often perceive that because of people's self-sufficiency they no longer cry out as if they depend on God, rather their prayers often become a formula by which they attempt to realize their own goals. Hence, it is not odd that churches and the believers in them are in a poor state today. Rather than praying and crying out they turn to their own human abilities and compete with the world. Jonah said, "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; And my prayer went [up] to You, Into Your holy temple." (Jonah 2:7)

The Psalmist, when being persecuted, said in Psalm 142, "I cry out to the LORD with my voice; with my voice to the LORD I make my supplication. I pour out my complaint before

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Him; I declare before Him my trouble." (Psalm 142:1b-2)

Through our cries to God I often remind myself that God cares for us. He wants to hear our cries of brokenness, and not our arrogant proclamations and explorations for an easy way out.

3. WHEN WE TURN TO GOD WE MUST BE READY TO PAY A PRICE.

When in prayer and crying out to the Lord we ought not to seek for a way out as a way of overcoming our small identity crisis, while afterward continuing on our own way. Rather we ought to do that which was God's original plan in the beginning. When we come to church wearing on our faces and in our hearts the mark of God's dark depths, what we ought to do is give God the sacrifice of praise and fulfill all that is needed to endure to the end so that we become free and full of joy. Just as Jonah did, amidst despair he cried out to God. He did not bargain with God about how much he would surrender or whether he ought to raise his hands and begin to fight for his life. He simply began to thank God that He saved his life and restored to him His original plan to go to Nineveh to preach that which God had ordered. He didn't seek for a way to ease the pressure, as many do in prayer, rather he changed and became obedient,

“But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation [is] of the LORD.’ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.” (Jonah 2:9, 3:3)

In 1950 five young students, while seeking for their call, heard about the Aucan Indian tribe in Ecuador. Nate Saint was one of them. His aviation abilities were a good tool for spreading the gospel in those secluded places of South America.

The Aucan tribe lived in small nomad groups and often moved from one place to another. They were called “wild naked people”. They moved because they believed that if they stayed in one place too long that it would be fatal for them because of their intertribal enemies. There were many murders among them, over 60% dead due to them killing each other.

As time moved along these young men felt God’s called to the Indians. From a small aircraft, for a time, they threw gifts to the Indians, and when they thought that they had forged a friendship they landed on a small landing strip near one of their villages with the hope that they could meet with them. After landing they prepared a place to sleep where they stayed for three nights. They did not see anyone, save one man and two women

who were very friendly and spent the whole day with them. From then on they did not have contact with the Indians until the day when they were murdered. While they flew over the tribes Nate observed that the people would come to the landing strip. He landed and said to the others to come with him. All at once they came forth and ran them through with spears.

After some time their children and relatives felt a call to continue the work they started in order to tell the tribe about Jesus. After this tribe received Jesus they changed their name to Waodani, meaning “people of truth”. What if these missionaries hadn’t obeyed God’s call, even though it cost them much? They could have been missionaries in many other less dangerous places; nevertheless they decidedly counted the cost for their obedience.

What did we vow God when we were saved, when He spoke to us or when we

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felt His touch? Where did it all disappear? It is not important for us to have the kind of call these missionaries had, but what would have happened had they first decided to get settled in their life: to buy a house, a car, find a job, and then if there was time to serve Jesus? While these things are not wrong, they would have missed God's perfect will.

Our situation is surely not so hard, although for them it was God's plan. Maybe things are hard for us, so once again we seek God, but in the wrong way. Hence it is needful that we ask ourselves if we are in God's dark depths. Maybe we are truly desperate or bitter, yet we can still cry out to Him, repent, and renew our vows because this is the only victorious way out of His depths. "So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry [land]." (Jonah 2:10) Now is the

time to make the decision to change, because it is better to be vomited out of a fish than by the Lord of Hosts Himself. It is time to bring God a sacrifice of praise, gain freedom, and pay the price that is needed to turn to God in obedience. In this way, I believe, we will come out from God's depths as victors. "Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High. Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." (Psalm 50:14-15)

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