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THE NECESSITY OF THE HARD ROAD

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Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works." (Matthew 16:24-27)

At the start of the born-again experience most believers are excited about Jesus and His work in their life. But when the Lord desires a deeper surrender from them, as in a need to take a harder road they grow weary. An

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important part of discipleship is travelling the hard road; it is a sign of surrender and true faith. It is impossible to avoid it; we simply must travel it in order to have true fellowship with Jesus and in order to receive our reward. For we know that we do not receive our reward easily!

► **1. THE HARD ROAD REQUIRES THAT EVERY BELIEVER DENY HIMSELF AND FOLLOW JESUS.**

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24)

When Jesus spoke to His disciples about the cross, they knew exactly what He was talking about because in that time crucifixions were a customary method of carrying out a death sentence. Criminals were forced to carry a cross through the town to the place of where their death sentence would be carried out. They knew well that Jesus was serious when He called them to follow Him; they knew that

fellowship with Him included surrender, risk of death and leaving behind their old way of life. They knew that they would have to publicly identify themselves with Him and face opposition. They knew that they could not love those dear to them more than Him because He said, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:26-27)

What have we done in regards to the requirements of the hard road? Today's ministers, modern pastors, and congregations will do all they can so that the people in the pews feel good. Some, in fact, emphasize that the church needs to be a place of acceptance, not of judgment, and don't want sinners to feel "bad", in regards to feeling convicted of their sin; which is why they often preach positive messages, some in fact have friendly churches in which Christ's cross or blood is hardly mentioned, so that the people are not shocked. Some simply want to draw people with good music or food – but they all work toward one goal and that is to gain new people. This is why it is not odd that church have unsaved people sitting in the pews, believers who have never been converted like they ought, who have never come under the authority of Christ, believers and even pastors who have never received the power from on high or experienced His might. Why? Because

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no one has ever showed them the hard road necessary for every true disciple.

Believers cannot effectively follow Christ if they are full of their selves and their unfulfilled desires that they hope to realize with Jesus' help. This gospel and lifestyle is not real Christianity. After a while they leave the church because they came to a crisis in their life, some trouble or pain. In fact, the problem is that someone presented to them a false gospel and failed to show them Christ's hard road. They only heard about peace and good feelings. As soon as they come across their first trial they give in because they have never died with Christ. In truth they do not belong to Christ because they have never identified with Him; their sin nature, which was never crucified, still reigns in them. Jesus was not given to us as a means of realizing our selfish dreams and desires; rather He wishes to fulfill His plans and desires through us. Paul clearly said, "And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Galatians 5:24)

This new generation of believers is sensual. Their emotions are quickly excited and they are moody, not wanting to feel any kind of pain or trouble – they want to be comfortable and have eternal life without pain, and renunciation of one's old life without trouble. They want to see God work on their behalf to avoid difficulties. Jonathan Edwards once said that there does not exist in the world any working of God that did not include difficulty.

However, because of this desire to avoid trouble many Christians are emotionally immature. They do not want to pay the price of surrender by walking the hard road. They simply do not want to die. This is why there is so much fear inside of them. But once they die like they should the fears leave. We must die in order to rise with Christ. This is why the church is so filled with spiritually immature converts who constantly shield themselves from pain and difficulty; they do not want to surrender and roll up their sleeves; rather they regularly flee the hard road and as a result emotionally and spiritually die. As soon as we begin to turn to ourselves and away from the lost we begin to lose our primary purpose and mission, to glorify Jesus among the lost.

When the Apostle Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica in order to encourage the young believers who were facing troubled times, Timothy didn't tell them to flee or to bind "evil spirits of trouble"; instead he told them to persevere in faith so the devil couldn't tempt them to run away from their problems causing their efforts to be made ineffective. "...and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you

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concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain." (1 Thessalonians 3:2-5)

The believers in Thessalonica, just like many believers today sought God and hoped that He would free them from their momentary troubles on earth, but God has never promised us that he would do that. Actually, He gave us the strength to grow through difficulties and trouble, because spiritual growth and the hard Christian walk includes obedience despite the trials and troubles through which we momentarily pass. It is

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interesting how we are obedient to him while no difficulties take place, and then we often quickly desert our convictions.

This is a great test for many believers and stipulates if we will accept the hard road or flee. It is easy to proclaim that we are Christians, but the true ones are made known under pressure. That's why Paul feared that the devil would tempt them into taking a painless way out, as he tempted Jesus in the desert, and because of that his work among them would be in vain. If a person does not die to himself, and does not mature, how can God use him?

This new generation cannot endure Christ's cross because they have never heard the true gospel, which includes difficulty and pain, surrender and sacrifice. Christianity is not just hanging out with a bunch of good people, potlucks, and debates over theology; Christianity is literally dying to self and serving Christ. Only when it hurts can we see what we are truly made of and only then can we have a share in Christ's suffering, for which Paul longed for in order to experience God. "...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3:10-11)

► 2. THE HARD ROAD CAN BE DEADLY.

"For whoever desires to save his life will lose

it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:25-26)

The hard road can be deadly. It is deadly for many Christians all over the world who each and everyday are literally murdered because of their surrender to Jesus. Many Christians and pastors in the East are persecuted everyday; they are threatened and murdered because of Jesus while western believers think that persecution is when someone looks at you wrong or when their computer at work breaks down. When they feel that they are about to lose their reputation because of Christ they immediately pray for wisdom to flee the pressure. This is why our friends, co-workers and family members are not saved, we are afraid to publicly stand for Jesus, we are afraid of our life, yet we have no fear of God and have never had a serious experience with Him. We simply do not want to experience rejection and pain, which Jesus Himself suffered. We want to live long, healthy, happy, and fulfilled lives on earth. Our thoughts are not directed to eternity and Jesus' second coming.

This is why the church around the world has created the new theology of freedom and life without any suffering and pain. For many, hell is just a fairy tale. People are no longer filled with the Holy Spirit; instead they are full of themselves. They no longer have courage;

when they are converted they turn into passive cowards, they become refined believers of ecumenical orientation who save their lives and reputations by fleeing Jesus' cross.

Believers of the past surrendered their lives to Jesus because they were preached the gospel in true power and might; because of conviction of sin many would agonize for hours crying out to God to save them. Instead of being surrendered to Jesus like we need, instead of dying of exhaustion in revival, today we die because of high cholesterol (too little fasting); today it is fashionable to engage in "spiritual warfare" as a balance to quality discipleship. People love concerts and seminars but no one wants to surrender their life in prayer for others.

We have become too refined and cultured because we don't want to die to self for Jesus. We want to have our own religion without taking the hard road. We have our own life and the only thing that worries us is how God will bless us – no dying to self. We love our wives, husbands, and children more than Jesus. Things are more important to us than Him. If we don't want to die, just like the devil

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did, we can always find a verse in the Bible somewhere to take out of context which will justify our laziness and half-hearted surrender.

To follow Christ means to die for Him, if need be, just like He died for us. The apostles gave their very lives for Christ and many of them were murdered. Many missionaries surrendered their lives and went all around the world and shed their blood to share the gospel. They didn't retire enjoying fancy houses which they built for themselves or fly private jets and luxury vehicles under the banner of "God's blessing". Jesus gave His life to lead us to the Father.

▶ **3. IF WE PERSEVERE ON THE HARD ROAD A REWARD AWAITS US.**

"For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works." (Matthew 16:27)

A reward awaits those who travel the hard road and persevere to the end being faithful despite the trials and pain which they faced while

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walking with Christ. No reward is free; rewards are given to those who have earned them. They are not received on a basis of mercy and goodwill, rather on the basis of works. Rewards are not gifts, they must be earned. No athlete or scientist who received a reward for their work did not receive it on the basis of sympathy, rather for their achievement. Unfortunately, although this principle is clear to the children of the world, the church has bought the lie that everything in the end is a part of grace. Believers believe that they can never lose their salvation and regardless of what they do they will receive a reward, because as they say, "Christ is full of grace".

And it is true that Christ is full of grace, but it seems that we have lowered heavenly principles to some pathetic, mystical and ineffective faith. This is why it is not strange that people do not want to be saved because they often do not understand what we are saying to them – the gospel we present is something mystical which does not demand anything of us. How many books are written on self-help and Christian psychology which admonish people that they can help themselves without real surrender to Christ. It is not strange that people leave the church and turn to Islam when the church is not radical and stands on nothing at all. Everything has become relative and our faith no longer demands anything of us.

But, there is one thing we must know – Jesus Christ is given authority to judge the entire

world and when He returns everyone's life will be carefully questioned and judged, how Christians lived their lives and used their opportunities, gifts, and responsibilities; even finances. He won't be interested in our beliefs, but rather our works which accompanied our beliefs. He won't be interested in how many books we read, rather how often we kept His Word; He won't be interested in our titles and diplomas, but rather if we died with Him and did His will.

Jesus carefully describes for us in Matthew the final judgment. "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides *his* sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly,

I say to you, inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me.' Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do *it* to one of the least of these, you did not do *it* to Me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-46)

The first sign that we have died to self is that we are on the hard and narrow road. How we relate to those around and what we do for Him will separate us from those who masquerade. Those who are only masquerading, whether or not they believed, will find themselves in the eternal flame because on that day God will not simply turn His head to evil. We will not be

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able to give Him a ransom for our life because “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26)

Our heavenly reward will be dependent upon how we related to Jesus during the hard seasons of life. Did we flee from the opportunities the Lord gave us to grow in Him under pressure? Did we suffer long knowing that God is with us and has a lesson for us to learn? Or did we simply lead a life full of cowardice, fornication and lies thinking that we will receive a reward despite our lifestyle? The Word tells us, “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” (Revelation 21:8)

A heavenly reward and heaven is not for the lazy believer, who does not wish to die together with Christ, rather for those who have surrendered their life to the death and who have died

together with Him on the cross of Golgotha. It is for those who have not withdrawn from the hard road and who were ready to lay down their rights and their life for Him, for the one whose righteous deeds are seen.

This is why we need to make a decision – deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus because the hard path is the way to final victory and the reward which awaits us in the heavens. “Blessed *are* the dead who die in the Lord from now on. ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.’” (Revelation 14:13)

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