



ASK THE  
CHRISTIAN  
COUNSELOR



# I WANT TO ESCAPE

REACHING FOR HOPE  
WHEN LIFE IS TOO MUCH

RUSH WITT

# Chapter 1

## I'VE GOT TO GET OUTTA HERE!

*Temptation may even be a blessing to a man when it reveals to him his weakness and drives him to the almighty Savior.*

— F. B. Meyer

**W**hen life overwhelms, we often want to get away—escape holds a powerful allure amid hard times. In every season, a myriad of pressures, challenges, regrets, and disappointments ooze from the ground of this fallen world and into our lives. These trials and tribulations provoke us to cry, “I’ve got to get outta here!” Have you felt it? Have you said it? Have you screamed it? Of course you have, and I have too. When darkness falls on us, escapism surges. We come from a long line of escapers, beginning with our first parents who hid from God in the garden (Genesis 3:8).

### **THE LONGING TO ESCAPE**

As I type these words, I want to escape. A nasty virus has swarmed the earth. Racial tensions are exploding in the streets of our town. Conflict between Christians over masks and social distancing and vaccines and government restrictions have boiled over in the melting pot of our church. All of this has been stacked on top of the ordinary pressures of life. No one wonders why depression rates

are rising along with substance abuse and even suicide. We all long to escape, and for good reason.

But even though we have many good reasons to desire escape, our faith in Jesus reminds us that we have even better reasons to depend courageously on our Savior in the ups and downs of life. And that's what this book is all about: learning to courageously depend on Christ when we yearn for escape. In the time we spend together in this book, we have three goals.

1. *We wish to gain a better understanding of why escape appeals to us.* Why are we so good at running for the door when life gets hard? Courageous dependence on Christ will come more quickly if we understand why escape feels so compelling.

2. *We must learn to draw near to Jesus, who remains closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24).* Even when we're ready to run, even when we do run away, he relentlessly pursues his people. He won't be put off or put out by our pleas for escape. Instead, he draws close to us with grace and mercy to comfort us and lead us in the better path. His enabling grace empowers us to endure hardship when we courageously depend on him.

3. *We need practical plans to shape our response to trouble.* In Christ, we have a wealth of resources to help us exercise courageous dependence when life gets hard. You and I need a clear strategy to help us walk forward with Jesus, step by step.

I pray God will give us courage and comfort as we explore the reasons we so often want to run and his hope-filled direction to a better path. To my fellow escapees: Welcome—you're not alone. We're in this together. And most importantly, Jesus walks with us.

**TOGETHER WITH JESUS IN OUR TROUBLE**

We must remember that we struggle *together* as fellow sinners and sufferers. We are not alone because we all sin and we all suffer. But our ultimate hope and comfort comes from knowing that another Person is present in our trouble. The Lord himself has come down, entered our world, understood our need, and given us his enduring answers. At the very center of Christian courage stands not a principle or system but a Person, and this Person not only created the universe but intimately knows and loves each one of us.

As a pastor who practices premarital and marriage counseling, it's a joy to watch couples become real people to each other. Most couples begin their relationships by putting one another on pedestals. In the early days, they think they know each other, but actually the relationship hovers in a kind of unreal realm. But with time, care, and experience, something amazing occurs. They come down from their ethereal pedestal and become real people to each other. They really get to know each other. They learn the deeper details of their personalities and likes and dreams. What's happening to them in the course of their relationship through the good times and bad times? They're becoming real to each other.

We all need the same experience to dawn on us in our daily spiritual life with Jesus. Jesus Christ is the Person most present in our trouble. He has come down to really know us and to be known by us; to save us, to help us, to bless us, to carry us. Jesus is our ultimate help. By grace he endured the cross for us, and by courageously trusting in him, we find the power we need to endure when we want to escape. From this point on, I want you to intentionally think on the ever-present Person of Jesus. Let's make a habit of knowing he is near.

### **THREE STORIES**

In this book, we hope to get much more acquainted with our own hearts and the desire inside us to escape from hard things. The good news is that we're in this together—all of us look for escape at different times and in different ways. For instance, consider the following stories of three people who dealt with a difficult situation by trying to escape. How does it work out for them? How does it work out for you?

#### **1. The Student**

Jake's dad works for an iron mill. A new and better job brought his family to a new and better town. Moving to a different city can be hard on any kid, but Jake found the transition to a new high school during his sophomore year especially difficult. Jake struggled to keep up with this school's academic rigor. Instead of changing his study habits, Jake found an easy escape online. Day after day Jake ignored his homework piling up and went to his room, put on his headphones, and played video games. When his parents tried to talk to him, he just ignored them. While he was playing video games, his only worries were about his score, and that's the way he wanted to keep it. Meanwhile, midterm grades were coming out in only a week. . . .

#### **2. The Lovebird**

Mia and Trevor started dating two years ago. She liked his sense of humor, and he loved her wit. Talk of marriage sprang up quickly. But now a year and a half later, Trevor still hasn't popped the question. The exciting plan to build a life together is now a fading memory. Truth be told, Mia and Trevor argue more than talk, and Mia fears her dream of marriage is slipping away. She

feels trapped in a relationship that is headed nowhere. Overwhelmed by daily life, Mia trades the feelings of sorrow for another feeling: pain. In the solitude of her private moments, she cuts herself. The blade stings but comforts. If she can't control her future with Trevor, at least she can control this. To her friends, cutting doesn't make sense, but to Mia, it is her escape.

### **3. The Patient**

*Terminal.* It was the word Carson thought he was ready to hear, but his heart sunk deeper with each syllable. His doctors suspected cancer after Carson's first appointment, when he described having relentless headaches, fatigue, blackouts, and debilitating vertigo. Doctors gave Carson only months to live. Even so, the fear of increased pain, loss of freedom, and a mounting sense of sorrow loomed large. During his treatments, Carson met many patients who had received the same news. Some of them fixed their minds on bucket lists and final adventures. But Carson couldn't silence the panicked refrain of his heart: run, run, run. *Where can I run?* he thought. He had no place to go and not enough energy to run, so instead he binged on TV shows. He found season after season to watch (some he had seen before). Somehow watching other people's stories brought him a bit of relief—it distracted him from his story.

Jake, Mia, and Carson feel trapped by trouble. They each have their own escape routes. Each of them finds some quick relief from trouble with their preferred way of escape. But with the short-term relief comes long-term trouble. Almost anything can function as an escape route—humans are endlessly inventive about ways to escape trouble in the short term. There is shopping, gaming, watching TV, sex, pornography, sleep, sports, eating, exercising,

reading, alcohol, drugs, cutting, and even thoughts of suicide. You can probably add to this list. What does your list include? Take a moment and think about how you deal with trouble. What is your preferred short-term path to relief? And what long-term trouble might be coming your way because of it?

### **THE BIBLICAL, BETTER WAY**

When life overwhelms us, we often see escape as our only option. But through Scripture, God welcomes us to walk his better way: the way of grace-enabled, faith-directed, Christ-centered, Word-delivered, glory-focused dependence on God. I know, that's a mouthful! But over the coming chapters, we will unpack this full-orbed view of God's help in our trouble and apply it to life in meaningful ways. But before we embark, I want to share one simple verse to illuminate our way forward and help drive our transformation from those who escape to those who courageously depend on Jesus. "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

First Corinthians 10:13 has comforted my heart in times of trouble, strengthened my grip on God, and directed my life in countless ways. Through it we realize our trouble is common, our God is faithful, and that courageous dependence is the way toward peace and rest. While we naturally pursue escape routes on our own terms in our own strength, God offers us true escape by depending on his faithful care in the midst of trouble. Rather than giving up and running away, we can find real refuge in God's

loving control of our lives. Instead of escaping our trouble by running from God, we can “escape” overwhelming trouble by running to God. God knows that you need to escape but not by using your own methods. Instead he offers himself so that you can endure. When we depend on God in the midst of real trouble, he will give us the courage to trust him and to give up our own methods of escape. That’s what courageous dependence on God looks like.

The language of courageous dependence may seem new to you, but it’s as old as the world. From the beginning of creation, every creature has been built for dependence. By our very nature, we creatures need our Creator. Every good thing we have comes from him (James 1:17). But through our fall into sin, every human heart has turned away from ultimate dependence on God. We have gone our own way, leading us into many struggles and heartaches. But we have hope in Christ. He calls us to turn back to him. Turning to Jesus instead of our usual methods of escape means we need the courage of Jesus’s ever-present help—left to ourselves we will always choose to run. But Jesus is faster, stronger, and kinder than we think. He calls us back and shows us a better way forward. It all starts with turning to him.

I want you to think of the many challenges in your life, but instead of shrinking back through your chosen method of escape, you grow forward in courage, love, and purpose. Can you grow to your full potential as the person God intends for you to be without giving up your escape routes? The Bible says no. And I am guessing that deep down inside, you know the answer is no too—running away will only stunt your growth. But how do you change? How do you learn a better way—to cling tightly to Jesus instead of



clinging to all those things that promise only a bit of short-term relief but in reality produce long-term trouble?

Jesus offers his people an infinitely better way than finding our own methods of escaping the troubles of life. As we depend on his help, we can replace our natural desire to escape with a courageous dependence on God, who lovingly controls our lives. By growing in this important area of the Christian life, we can find the hope and help we need to thrive under God's care for us, as he walks with us through the hard places of life. This is the better way!

### **REAL CHANGE**

God uses a number of words in the Bible to describe his better way. Of those numerous words, *repentance* always jumps out at me. I long thought of repentance as a kind of dirty word, filled with shame and regret. But I've come to see the beauty of this incredible gift, which brings the best kind of change to our lives. Let's explore the meaning of repentance to understand the wonderful hope of a new way forward that God offers to you and me.

To quote the Puritan Thomas Watson's definition, "Repentance is a grace of God's Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed."<sup>1</sup> The word *reformed* means changed. That's what we want! We want to be changed, and repentance is how we begin and continue to change. But also notice the two dimensions: an inward dimension and an outward dimension. One dimension is rooted in the heart, and the other is revealed in the fruit we bear. Let's be sure to keep both in view as we continue unpacking biblical change.

Perhaps like me, you also hear the word *repentance* in a harsh tone: "Suck it up, Buttercup. Stop whining and

get with God's program!" Let's set the record straight by considering three attributes of real change.

### **1. Soul-Comforting Change**

Many of your attempts to change might leave you feeling like a disobedient dog skulking back to his bed, scolded by an exasperated master. Or perhaps you feel like a child being forced to sit in the hall and think about what you've done. Change and repentance, if not properly understood, seem dreary. But true change—understood in the light of God's grace—comforts us by recentering our focus and hope on Christ, who loves us more than we know.

### **2. Mind-Renewing Change**

God's grace transforms our minds. Paul urged his Roman brothers and sisters to resist the pull of the world by being "transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Though sin and the challenges of life can cloud our eyes and hold out our own ways of escape as the best way forward, God's gracious work of change restores our vision. Through faith, we gain the ability to see his enduring love, his patience, his nearness to us in all times. We need this vision more than the air we breathe.

During a recent trip to California, I stayed in a beautiful city surrounded by a ring of exquisite mountains. But because smog had settled into the valley, I couldn't see the mountains. When I looked out at the horizon, I thought it was just an endless sky. Because my vision was clouded, I missed the mountains' glory. Then one day the winds shifted, the smog cleared, and the mountains came into view. What a sight! In a way, our spiritual life often seems like this. Our minds are clouded by our own desire to

avoid difficulty, by the world around us encouraging us to do what we can to escape trouble, and by the evil presence in our world that is always working to cloud our minds from knowing God. But we can ask for the wind of the Spirit to come and clear our vision and renew our mind. Turning to God for grace and forgiveness is the first step toward a clear mind and a clean heart. Then, Jesus enables us to draw ever closer to him as he changes us over time.

### **3. God-Gifted Change**

Finally, we must remember real change is a gift—a soul-comforting, mind-renewing gift of grace. Especially when we feel we cannot go on, God’s grace alone is what will sustain us. Just think of what Jesus Christ endured to bring us the hope and change we need! Until we personally see his nail-scarred hands, we will undervalue this magnificent gift. Knowing it comes as a gift draws us into participating in God’s gracious work in our lives, like a moth to a flame.

### **OUR BASIC PLAN**

Throughout the coming chapters, we will consider a basic plan to help us enjoy God’s work of change as we stick to this biblical, better path of courageous dependence on God.

#### **Pray with Humility**

First, turn to God in prayer. With the psalmist, we cry,

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

My help comes from the LORD,

who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1–2)

Through prayer, we can and should pour out our hearts (even our frustrations and fears) before the Lord. Like storm-tossed sailors frantically battening the hatches on the high seas, we forget the Lord who controls the winds and waves. Or even worse, we turn against the Lord—rather than to him—when we need him most. So we first must cry out to the Lord, who is our ultimate help in desperate moments. What a comfort we have in knowing—in Christ—his ears remain ever-opened and listening for our cry.

### **Believe with Gospel Hope**

Second, put all of your faith in who God says he is. Throughout his Word and world, God has revealed to us his eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:20). If we are not persuaded of his power, plans, wisdom, and countless good gifts, our hearts will find no secure place to rest in times of trouble. An overwhelming desire to escape will settle in, unless we turn to the Lord for help and remind ourselves of his enduring truths. We must think carefully, deeply, and intentionally about how God's Word applies to the trials that tempt us to escape. As our belief and trust grow, our confidence in God follows. And our confidence in God will drive us cheerfully closer to him.

### **Act with Courageous Dependence**

Third, we must act on the truth we've come to know by prayer and careful thought. In the words of the apostle James, God calls us to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). For if we merely hear God's Word and not obey what he says, then we will be as the amnesiac who forgets even what he has come to know by heart. The wonderful Puritan Matthew

Henry encourages us to “Let the word of truth be carefully attended to, and it will set before us the corruption of our nature, the disorders of our hearts and lives; and it will tell us plainly what we are.”<sup>2</sup> We are people whom God adopted as children into his family, called to be imitators of our elder brother Jesus Christ, which means, among other things, joyfully enduring our trials and temptations with him and for him and through him.

Keep this plan in mind as you read. We will look more closely at the plan in the next chapter and, through the rest of this book, apply it to life.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. List some ways that you try to escape uncomfortable or overwhelming situations or problems.
2. What are some of the long-term consequences you (or others) have experienced by looking for your own ways to escape?
3. What differences do you see between your natural ways of escaping the hardship and the way God offers us escape through courageous dependence on him?

### **PERSONAL APPLICATION**

Over the course of the next forty-eight hours, take note of situations in which you have a choice between seeking your own path of escape from hard things and trusting God to walk with you through challenges. Pay attention to what you want. Do you believe that God will help you endure the hard moments, or do you just wish to escape? You might find yourself somewhere in the middle. No matter where you are, take note of how the desire for escape shapes your responses to life.