

Rescued from Hell

An Odyssey of Deception and Discovery

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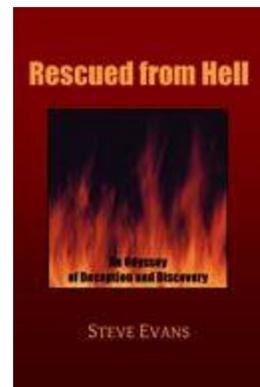
PREFACE

In the weeks and months that followed my conversion to Christianity in 1982, I had a great desire to share what my lost years had been like and to tell the story of how Jesus rescued me out of them. In the beginning it was surely a lot about my own need because it felt so good to be able to express the craziness and horror of those years *in the past tense*—and find in return some soothing measures of sympathy and understanding. That believers were inspired and encouraged and that unbelievers occasionally came to faith added immeasurably to the wonder of having a story like mine to tell.

I began to notice, however, that the more I shared my testimony with all of its bizarre and wildly insane aspects, the more I felt my *otherness* from others, and that was not what I needed! I desperately wanted to recover a sure sense of my common humanity—to *feel* human at last. Yet, sharing my testimony made me feel like a freak all over again because I never once came across another testimony remotely like my own nor could I avoid colliding with the emotional wreckage I was still wading through, pain that no one I met had a good remedy for or prior experience with mending.

People would tell me to trust the Lord, encourage me to give it to God and slap me on the back, saying how great it was that the Lord had delivered me. All of that was true, of course, but I had no idea *how to do it* with the internal damage that was still screaming for attention. Jesus rescued me from hell! Yet, I had been dropped back on earth with a ton of still scary stuff that was clinging to me like glue.

There followed then a long season of seeking inner healing: every conference I could go to, every book I could read, every prayer line I could find. All that grace gives as ways of bringing our hearts to God, I started applying in earnest. My journey through those years has brought me to a place where I am no longer in conscious touch with debilitating emotional damage. There may still be pockets of resistance, some even with surprising depths, but in terms of the day-to-day I am living way above and beyond my past, not because I am trying to push it down, but because I have pulled it all up—everything I could find. I have vigorously thought about it, prayed about it, given it to God piece by remembered piece in so many effective ways. I have actually become glad and grateful for all the experiences that I went through—a seemingly impossible turn of events!



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My heart's desire is that *this time around* my story will not be about me (though I am on every page), but about telling truth in a way that will help people out there, especially the ones who feel that their own path has been so tortured, so strange, so completely inexplicable to others that they feel isolated and estranged from the common run of humanity. Take heart if that describes you—for in the early days of my recovery I often challenged God saying (not politely), “Are you sure you can do this? Have You ever brought somebody back from this extremity of insanity and bondage? Will I ever feel human again?” How brash and belligerent! Yet I was desperate to believe that I wasn't stuck with being broken and freakish *for the whole of this life*—that God could indeed pull off that part of the rescue, too. Perhaps, however, your interest is not for your own healing but for gaining insight and understanding that will help you minister to others—I definitely had you in mind as well! The text is quite literally a primer on how to lead someone out of intense emotional and spiritual darkness by tracing the outlines of how Jesus did it for me.

I hope that you will enjoy taking this strange journey with me and that the Lord Himself will intercept us just as He did those unsuspecting disciples on the road to Emmaus, bringing liberating words of resurrection across their horizon. May these words enlighten or enliven you to see Him striding the heights beyond even those boundaries of fear and hope which may encompass your own life.

PART ONE: THE DESCENT

*From the devil's perspective this is a story that was never supposed to be told.
From my perspective it is a story that should never have happened.*

CHAPTER 1: THE NIGHT OF TERROR

“All I have to do is get home tonight, take these pills and it will be all over. Death is the only way out!” The night bus carrying me home seemed to take forever. As we rumbled through the flat Carolina farmland my thoughts tumbled over the crazy landscape of the past two years—my failed “spiritual journey.” I was more lost now than when that dazzling encounter with god got me going. How could I have failed so miserably to rise to the occasion, especially when so much was at stake?

With bitterness born of fear I reproached myself over and over for having missed out on connecting with my god. *I was lost, irretrievably lost to god.* But, boy oh boy, had I connected with myself. I had discovered repeatedly how shallow and vain, how cowardly and conceited, I really was. How bound by shyness and fears. How utterly unable to live with natural ease. How thoroughly fouled I was—a motor that never caught fire from the sparks. I must have been dreaming to think *I* could pull it off.



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A veil had been pulled back, a veil that had kept me in a dreamy cloud of naïve egotism all my growing years. Now, at twenty-three, I saw myself as I truly was: soul-less and sin-filled. Less than two years before in the presence of that light, thrilled by a divine awakening, I was drawn into revelations of a universal life meant to be shared with everyone. Now I just wanted to run and hide. That same light which showed me my god had eventually shown me too much of myself. There was no way out of the failed person I discovered myself to be and no way back to the happier (but unenlightened!) person I had been before that fateful day of revelation.

No wonder that just three weeks ago, my inner quest to unite with my god had been shattered by the experience of my soul leaving my body. At the time it was happening I knew *in my bones* that my soul was disgusted with me. Just as I was now. Everything in me that had the hope of becoming good or decent took wings and flew away. The crazy thing was that I had never before been aware of *having* a soul, but from the moment it began to depart, the awful reality of losing it was undeniable. I was transfixed in horror—this was no Faustian legend, this was *my* life—yet there seemed to be nothing I could do to rescue myself. The next day I went to my psychologist, the hated “Rock,” the name I secretly gave him due to his technique of never initiating conversation, only trying to force me, through his stony silence, to speak. I never let him see so much as a glimpse of the real me.

Now, however, it was either turn myself in to the psychiatrists or head up to the Canadian northwest and hide out from humanity in hopes of not damaging anyone else with what I had become. A man without a soul is a danger to the world and (thank God) there was nothing in me yet that wanted to see harm come to others. “The Rock” put me on Meyer Ward, Duke Hospital’s psychiatric unit in Durham, North Carolina. This was right at the time when I should have been graduating. After two weeks of endless tests and interminable inner torment (paranoia, self-hatred, foul thoughts) I was released. Evidently, some of the best shrinks in the world could do nothing for me. I was totally unchanged and completely un-helped, even though I had at last spilled the beans and given them everything I had been hiding away from “the Rock” *ad nauseum*.

The Duke doctors gave me drugs and sent me to a halfway house in town. The message was clear: *For me there could be no rescue*. The doctors were well-intentioned and well-informed, but they didn’t have a clue how to reach me or free me. They all too obviously gave no credence to the spiritual realities I had encountered and treated them as if they were delusions. I on the other hand could look upon them in no other way than that those moments of divine encounter were the most *vital* *real* moments of my life. If those moments were delusions or illusions as these doctors implied, then what was the rest of my life? They had no answer for that.

I desperately needed answers from someone. I needed someone to guide me through these spiritual realities, to show me how to make sense of what I had experienced—not to disparage it as if there was no substance to the spiritual side of life, or as if it could have no legitimate claim upon us. These scientists of the mind were practical atheists (whatever their Saturday or Sunday morning convictions may have been). They were

blind guides where these spiritual realities were concerned, powerless to help one like me, caught in the grip of what Kierkegaard described as “fear and trembling” and “the sickness unto death.” So I sneaked out of the halfway house my first night there. What was the point in staying? Besides it was run by a bully who clearly loved to lord it over the broken ones under his authority. I had a major aversion to bullies. I also had money enough and time to spare at the downtown bus terminal, so I hired a taxi to take me to an all-night drug store. That’s where I got the sleeping pills. I had no idea how many I might need so I bought two over-the-counter boxes.

When the bus pulled into my hometown around four or five in the morning, my resolve remained unwavering: Death was the only way out. I found a taxi still operating (luck was with me!) which dropped me off at my parents’ house. All was dark and silent. My parents were asleep, not expecting me to be coming home from Durham. Quietly, I let myself into my room at the other end of the ranch style house. I don’t remember how long I might have thought about it before I opened the first pack of sleeping pills and took them all. I don’t think it was very long, but some of the details of this evening are vague. Others are seared into my memory.

Shortly after taking the pills a strange thing began to happen. Something shifted in me and I was flooded with hope. Perhaps the chemical influence temporarily broke the grip of the depressing thoughts I had been having. I don’t know. I only know that to my deranged way of thinking, this moment now held the possibility of the transformation I had been seeking. The next thing is hard to admit, but it seemed to me that if I was to experience a kind of rebirth back into life, I needed to be entirely natural, as natural as I had been the first time around. That’s right—I stripped off all of my clothes. I then walked outdoors fully nude in the direction of the rising sun. A brand new day was dawning—that mere fact seemed saturated with significance and supernatural potential. Alas, those sweet dreams were not to be! After only a few brief moments this gossamer sense of impending glory dissipated like a morning mist and I was left shivering, naked and exposed—exposed once again as a fool and a fraud.

I hastily returned to my room and, filled afresh with shame and contempt, lay down on my bed to die. By now I could feel the weight of the sleeping pills taking over. My eyelids had become heavy. I made no effort to resist the downward spiral. This was what I wanted, what I needed—the Big Sleep. To close my eyes and *never* awaken. To never have to be me ever again. Even if I was to be nothing at all that was still a huge plus in my eyes. I was not looking for Nirvana, much less the Christian idea of heaven. I was looking for complete non-existence and fully expected to find it. Just when I thought I was almost there, it all went unbelievably and horribly wrong.

I am well aware that I cannot take you into what happened next, nor would I wish to if I could. I was seventeen years into my Christian life before I was healed of this one experience—and that was almost twenty-seven years after the event. What happened was this: Up from the hidden depths, seemingly from the bowels of the earth, an invisible army of unspeakably foul beings began to penetrate my mind and lay claim to

my body. Nothing I had ever thought *possible* in this life prepared me for the sheer terror of feeling, sensing and hearing these demonic entities scrabbling all over me.

Their insistent message projected into my mind was shocking and already being partially realized within me—they had come to feed upon me and torment me. Forever. I realized with horror that no one who ever knew me, in learning of my death, would know this is how I ended. No, not *ended*. Once I actually died no amount of screaming or resisting could change one iota of the torture they intended. *It would never end!* With all the strength remaining in my physical body I powered up and out of that hellish entanglement.

Rising from the bed, I staggered into the bathroom to splash water in my face and try to awaken further. I remember staring deep into my eyes in the bathroom mirror in desperation and fear, as if I could somehow summon up something from within myself that could give answer to this horrible predicament. *Get a grip! Think! Do something quick!* I thought death would be the way out, but it was a trap, a sadistic nightmare that was waiting for me with gleeful malevolence on the other side of the bathroom wall.

It was then that god showed up. The divine being that had come into my off-campus farm house at Duke one and a half years earlier now reappeared. Then it had been bathed in shimmering light, filled with promise. Now it simply was there. *More real than the floor and walls*. More real than me. I could sense it with every fiber of my being, but I couldn't see it. Yet, its presence was in this moment more complete than any of the encounters I had had with it since its first appearance. I knew full well its past displeasure with me and shrank inwardly at realizing that it knew also how ignobly I had failed once again to find the way to rise into its higher life.

Just as I feared, my god began reproaching me for the willful weakness, cowardice and inhibition that kept me from releasing myself to his calling. My whole life began to pass in review as I was held transfixed by the unwanted visions. I was shown everything about my life in relation to this god: what I had been given, what was expected, what I failed to do. I saw so clearly my sin as that of holding back and fully agreed within myself that it was a terrible sin, *unforgivable*.

According to the revelation I had received, the fate of the universal consciousness I had been made part of hung in the balance, so I had not only failed myself and this god, but I had failed everyone connected to me. I could not argue with the judgment that came next. I was pronounced guilty and sentenced to the damnation of eternal separation from god and from anything resembling life. I would forever be in the self-made hell of a consciousness that was meant to awaken (and bring many into awakening) but was now doomed to collapsing upon itself like the “black holes” formed by imploding stars.

Nothing could change this irreversible and final decree. There was no possibility of repentance, forgiveness, or mercy. I could not even think of those concepts. Besides, the truth was that I had failed many times over in the attempt to unite with this god and become an agent of transformation. I was totally in agreement with the judgment and



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the sentence. I *deserved* damnation. My guilt was unarguable, indefensible. I was now a lost soul furiously rejected by my god for reasons I completely accepted. I held myself in bitter contempt—just as god did. Hell was the only possible end for one like me. What would have been the point of pleading for further chances? I had proven myself incapable of changing, unworthy of sustaining.

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