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A TIME WHEN AUGUSTINE RAN

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INTRODUCTION

My thoughts in this little article center around "a time when Augustine ran," a time when he who later became known as St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo fled. Related to this incident in his life I shall endeavor to bring forth several thoughts pertinent to the Christian life. Please bear with me, for I shall not immediately reveal the specifics of the occurrence, but save that revelation until a later point in the article. Does this grab your interest and curiosity the more? Well, that it exactly what I have intended. Further, in order to make it more difficult for the reader to simply scroll down and discover the specifics of the incident involved, I shall purposely word my subtitles so as not to reveal too much too soon, and I shall also avoid subdivisions under those subtitles with caps and bolding. I would like you to read the entire article. Therefore, please read on...

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01 -- WHAT HIS RUNNING WAS NOT

It was not the running of a wicked man. In 1 Peter 4:4, the Apostle Peter wrote of what those who "run" in wickedness think of those who do not accompany them: "Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you." The world still has that same attitude today toward those who do not run with them in their riotous and exceedingly wicked behavior -- thinking themselves to be the do-gooders while labeling Christians and their teachings as the source of much

that is evil and wrong in the world. On the other hand, one can be falsely suspected of running with the world. In Job 34:8, one of Job's accusers falsely accused him of going "in company with the workers of iniquity" -- something he may have never done in his whole life. Not so in Augustine's case. There was a time in his life when he certainly was not a saint, and when his running was like that of the Prodigal in the far country when he made himself "a companion of riotous men [who] shameth his father" (Proverbs 28:7). But the occurrence which I shall later reveal happened after, not before, Augustine's marvelous conversion from a very profligate and wicked life. The running to which I refer took place at a time when Augustine could honestly testify with the psalmist in Psalm 119:63 -- "I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts."

Also, Augustine's fleeing was not the running away of a coward. Proverbs 28:21 tells us that "The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion." Like a braggadocios, big-mouth Goliath, many a proud sinner has boasted of how unafraid he is -- of anything! -- only to take off like a "skeered jack-rabbit through the sagebrush" when someone unimpressed by his proud boasting has posed a real challenge and threat to his professed bravery! When one's life is on the line, the men are separated from the boys and the brave from the cowardly, and history has proven thousands, if not millions, of times that the most brave people ever to face ominous threats are God's people. After receiving a "death-threat" Nehemiah, "bold as a lion," declared: "Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in" (Nehemiah 6:11). After inspiring and facilitating the death of some 7,000 people on September 11, 2001, Osama Bin Laden -- if still alive today, December 21, 2001 -- is apparently behaving quite unlike Nehemiah, who refused to "run for cover," and is fleeing here and there to avoid being killed himself! But back to Augustine -- his was not the running of a religious coward.

The incident to which I refer was not even a fleeing that prudently delayed an encounter to a later and more advantageous time. Ecclesiastes 9:4 tells us that "a living dog is better than a dead lion." There are indeed times when retreat from an attacking enemy is wiser than immediately joining the battle against him. In "The Art of Poetry on a New Plan (1761, vol. ii. p. 147)" is found the following quotation from Oliver Goldsmith:

For he who fights and runs away
May live to fight another day;
But he who is in battle slain
Can never rise and fight again.

No doubt more than one "dauntless lion" who has immediately faced and bounded into battle against his foe, has quickly made himself a "dead lion" and proven himself less wise than a "living dog" who has retreated and postponed his encounter with a threatening foe until a later, more advantageous time. But, the case under consideration did not involve Augustine in a fleeing that was to postpone a threatening encounter to a

later time. It was, rather, a fleeing that had in it no intention on his part to ever have such an encounter again.

Also, the running of Augustine to which I allude was not the flight of one who was forced to flee. Sometimes one is forced to flee by circumstances entirely beyond his or her control. In Genesis 16:8, Hagar, Sarai's maid said, "I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai." She had no choice; she was forced by Sarai's demand to leave the household of Abraham, immediately and forever. Her fleeing was neither wicked nor cowardly, just an exit that was forced upon her. Such was not the case with Augustine -- he had a choice when he ran that day. Through his own volition, he could have stayed or fled. He chose to flee.

Neither was Augustine's flight that day the sudden motion of one who has been startled. Sometimes one's senses can be so suddenly and loudly jolted that his, or her, feet take motion before reason has reached the brain! If you are one whose feet never got ahead of his mind -- one who has never suddenly jumped or bolted when "scared half out of your wits" by being thus startled by some loud "boo" or "bang" -- then you are not like most of us. There have been times when I nearly "jumped out of my shoes" (so to speak) when someone spoke behind me when I had no idea that anyone was near me! Now be honest: haven't your feet been suddenly put into motion and your mouth yelled out sometimes before reason reached your brain? -- I think if you have lived very long it is most likely that such has been your experience, and perhaps many times. But, Proverbs 3:25-26 does say "Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. For the LORD shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken." Christians can be startled, but should not allow themselves to be suddenly stampeded like a spooked herd of cattle. Augustine didn't run that day because he was startled or rushed into motion by a mindless panic.

I could go on relating more and more about "what Augustine's running was not," but I will conclude on this thought with just one more of such: His running that day was not that of a man trying to get somewhere on time. Sam Jones, in his book "Sam Jones' Gospel Sermons," told the following story: "I have often thought of that little fellow running down to the train with all his might, and just as he reached the depot the train rolled off, and there he stood, sad and disappointed and dejected, and a kind friend looked on the little fellow and said, 'My little man, I will tell you what is the matter.' 'What?' said the boy. 'Oh,' said the man, 'you didn't run fast enough.' 'Oh, yes, I did,' said the boy, 'I ran with all my might, but my trouble was I didn't start soon enough.'" Some folks are constantly late -- not because they don't "put the pedal to the metal" on the way there, but because they habitually start too late! It is likely that there would be far less lather and bother in the traffic on our city streets and cross-country freeways -- less of what has come to be called "road-rage" -- if everyone on those streets and freeways started in plenty of time to get there. How much that would lessen the tension in traffic I know not, for to a great extent we have become a nation of "Mad-Hatters," as it were, habitually in his attitude: "I'm late! I'm late! For a very important date!" -- even when we could travel at a slower, less frantic pace and still get there with time to spare. But

Augustine's flight that day was not that of one who started too late or of one who was needlessly in a "knock-down, drag-out rush."

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02 -- AUGUSTINE RAN AFTER A WARNING FROM HIS EYES AND HIS PERCEPTION

It is a blessing when one can see clearly. Keen vision has saved people from numerous sorts of things that posed a threat or might otherwise have brought them negative consequences had they not seen them in time to avoid such. Genesis 27:1 tells us of the time "when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim," and the following verses bring us the story of how Jacob, with his mother Rebekah's coaching, took advantage of Isaac's poor eyesight to steal Esau's blessing. Isaac was later shaken so badly after learning of his deception that he "trembled very exceedingly." And, across the centuries many others have been shaken and even many killed by what they failed to see in time.

The following account, found in both the Etheridge and Hare biographies of Adam Clarke tells of how a keen vision and perception by Clarke probably saved many lives: "St. Austel Chapel, Oct. 22d. -- I am just come in after preaching here. The crowd was immense. They had just enlarged the chapel, building a new end and gallery to it. When I was about to take my text, the gallery gave way; the timbers fairly came out of the walls, yet it did not fall down; but the confusion was awful. I was close to the gallery, and distinctly saw the peril; and, had it come down, I knew I must have been the first victim; but at least two hundred others would also have been killed. I stood in my place; for, had I moved, universal terror would have taken place, and many must have fallen victims to an impetuous rush. The chapel was soon nearly emptied, and no one was hurt."

In the instance being considered, Augustine's vision and perception did not spare him from physical death, but he may have thereby saved himself from something much worse:-- spiritual death. What our eyes see can be a means of either salvation or damnation. McCartney wrote:

"Augustine, in his Confessions, relates the story of a young man at Rome who had been won from a life of sin and licentiousness to Christ. He forsook his old ways. One day, some of his friends persuaded him to go with them to the Colosseum. He took a seat with his companions far up on the topmost bench of that colossal ellipse.

"As soon as the trumpet rang for the spectacle to commence, he firmly closed his eyes, resolved not to look upon the unholy sights. So the spectacles passed. But at one act, or conflict, the excited and blood-intoxicated thousands put up a mighty roar of acclaim. At the sound, Alypius opened his eyes, just for a moment. But by the one look he was lost. He forsook Christ and went back to the world.

"Do not imagine that it is safe to take even one look at sin, just for a moment to caress it with the touch of furtive imagination. One look turned Lot's wife to a pillar of salt."

But in the instance to which I make reference, what Augustine saw and perceived helped him avoid, rather than suffer, spiritual death.

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03 -- AUGUSTINE RAN BECAUSE HE WAS A NEW CREATURE IN CHRIST

As most students of Church History are well aware, prior to his conversion Augustine had lived a profligate life. After his most marvelous transformation into a new creature in Christ Jesus, he wisely kept away from his former associates in sin. However, one day when Augustine was on the street he was seen by a woman with whom he had associated in his life of sin. When HE saw HER, his perception of spiritual danger and temptation promptly warned him, and he began to run from her. She pursued him and being incredulous at his flight from one with whom he had been acquainted, she cried out to him, "Augustine, why do you run? It is I!" Knowing that God had made him a new and holy creature in Christ Jesus, Augustine replied, "I run because I am not I." She was the same, but he was no longer the same man, and saw the danger in a close encounter with her that might tempt him back into a life of sin.

In his book, "Heart Talks," Beverly Carradine wrote:

"Flight in some instances is the best, truest, and safest thing we can do. Joseph achieved an immortal victory when he fled from his temptress. There are places and circumstances where we can not tarry or dally. To do so is to fail. The impulse or impression to fly is from God himself, who would thereby save us. The divine whisper has been unmistakable at times in the life when there was peril, and when God saw the danger was greater than the man dreamed. The inward voice was to 'fly!' And many have obeyed, and fled, and so have been delivered, where others, under a mistaken idea of Christian hardihood and courage, have gone down.

"We read in First Samuel that David asked the Lord, 'Will the men of Keilah deliver me into the hands of Saul?' and God answered, 'They will deliver thee up.' This is a wonderfully impressive sentence, and shows God's knowledge of men embraces all that they are capable of doing, and what they will or would do under certain circumstances. This same Lord has lost none of his love for his people, and none of his knowledge of the sinful heart. So His whispers come to the soul as suddenly and clearly as ever warning was given to David, 'If such and such a thing takes place, you will fall into sin.'...

"There is an instrument lately invented by which it is said the capacity of children for the strain and drain of school hours is tested. God needs no machine of any kind to

know how much we can bear in the hour of moral trial. He knows us altogether. He is aware that a protracted assault upon the soul would cause some Christians to go down under certain circumstances, and so, as it does not agree with His plans to remove the cause, His method of deliverance to his child is the whisper to fly."

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04 -- SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT WHY AUGUSTINE RAN THAT DAY

The essence of what made Augustine flee from the temptation he was about to encounter in a close-up meeting with his former associate in a life of sin was both personal and spiritual.

He did not run because he feared violating some humanly written code of behavior. He did not run because some fellow Christian was constantly eagle-eyeing his every move to make sure he did not stray. He did not run even because he feared what others might think if he briefly greeted the woman as they passed on the street.

The essence of what made him run was quite personal. He instantly sensed that to him, that particular encounter, at that particular time, in that particular place, would be a source of temptation to him. I seriously doubt that Augustine would have, or ever did, insist that a rule be written down in some religious code that one must never greet on the street anyone with whom they have ever associated while living in sin. But for sure, he felt this encounter would be a temptation to him, and one that he should quickly avoid.

Again, the essence of what made Augustine run from the encounter with this woman was spiritual. He was following spiritual guidance from within, for his had been a marvelous transformation from the inside out -- not vice versa. In his book, "Ancient Prophets," S. L. Brengle wrote thus concerning Augustine's conversion:

"It was this that happened to Augustine, the brilliant young rhetorician and libertine of Carthage, as deeply convicted of sin and spiritual impotence, he walked in his garden. He heard a voice in his inner ear, saying, 'Take and read,' and taking up Paul's Epistle to the Romans he read: 'The night is far spent, the day is at hand let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day: not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.' Instantly his inner being flamed with spiritual light. The chains of his fleshly lusts and evil habits fell off, the dungeon doors of his soul flew open, and he walked out into the broad day of God's deliverance and Salvation, and the Scriptures henceforth were 'the man of his counsel.'"

He had been saved by a reading words of a Spiritual Book -- the Bible, which without any addition of human thought contains within its pages "all things that pertain

unto life and godliness," (2 Pet. 1:3). Yes, church organizations must have some rules, but one can make it into what Augustine later called "The City of God" without being an official member of any human organization and without subscribing to the rules of any church manual -- if he, or she, is genuinely born of the Spirit and follows the commands and counsels of God's Word.

Perhaps even before his encounter with this former associate in sin, Augustine was already quite well acquainted with much of the Scripture, including St. Paul's command in 2 Tim. 2:22 -- "Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." At any rate, I venture to say that it was probably Augustine's deep-seated determination to follow the codes of behavior recorded in God's Holy Word that prompted his evasive action that day, rather than some rule of the Church.

Finally, Augustine's running from temptation that day was Spiritual in that it was probably the Holy Ghost Himself who prompted the action. When one is really born of the Spirit, and especially when one is filled with the Holy Ghost, it can truthfully be said to him, or her:-- "But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him" (1 John 2:27).

A born again, Spirit-filled child of God has that Spiritual Monitor within Who gives the multitudinous and momentary directions necessary to avoid evil and follow after righteousness in this world. Lacking Him, no amount of written rules and regulations in a church manual and no number of spiritual policemen watching over one's every move can or will keep a professed Christian from sinning. With the abiding presence of God's Spirit within the heart, and with or without subscribing to church codes, the genuinely born again child of God can be, and is, kept from committing sin. Indeed, so strictly is that one kept by the Spirit from evil that so long as he retains God's Spirit, "he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). Please note of this last -- I did not say it -- God did!

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THE END