

RUNNING FROM A LION TO A BEAR

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When Amos addressed Israel regarding the judgment of the Lord, he wrote, "*Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! to what end is it for you? the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light. As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him. . .*" (Amos 5:18,19). With these verses Amos was referring to inescapable judgment, but it can also be said that sometimes when people attempt to avoid something harmful they may often go to an extreme which can be just as harmful as the issue they were initially trying to avoid. When this occurs, it is as if they are fleeing from a lion, only to be clutched by a bear. People have gone to all kinds of extremes in the name of Christianity.

Around the year A.D. 138, not long after the church had been established, a man named Marcion felt that the church was drifting into a cold form of legalism. From what we know about the church during this period, he may have been at least partially justified in his criticism because of those who were attempting to revive Judaism. However, Marcion ran away from the lion of cold, strict adherence to law and ran directly into the bear of extreme liberalism. Marcion asserted that Paul was the only apostle who had not fallen back into Judaism and that the Old Testament should be completely discarded! It would have been beneficial for him to heed the words of the very apostle he defended: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1-11).

Another reformer named Montanus stated his opposition to the improper exaltation of bishops, which was taking place in the second century A.D. However, instead of seeking a defense within the Scriptures for proper church organization, Montanus falsely claimed that Christians did not need the leadership of bishops at all because the Holy Spirit was still guiding Christians in a miraculous way! By doing this, Montanus ran away from the formalism of unscriptural leadership into a new form of false doctrine. He took the promises Jesus had applied to the apostles and applied them to himself, he claimed that his visions were more important than the writings of the apostles, and he said that the true test of a Christian was the possession of spiritual gifts. Many today make these same claims, but it should be noted that this doctrine is contrary to the Scriptures, and the teachings of Montanus were totally rejected by the early church.

In the fifteenth century a German priest named Martin Luther revolted against the Catholic doctrines of selling indulgences and "works only" salvation. He ran away from that lion and ran into the bear of "faith only" salvation. The truth was to be found between these two extremes. God's Word clearly teaches that neither the doctrine of "works only" nor the doctrine of "faith only" will save a person (Ephesians 2:8-9; James 2:14-26). Even though many are still influenced by Luther's doctrine, salvation requires both faith and works (John 8:24; Hebrews 5:9; Acts 10:34-35; Galatians 5:6).

When people go to extremes in Christianity it is always detrimental. The truth is usually found between the extremes. We should walk according to the ways of the Lord, departing neither to the right hand nor to the left (Deuteronomy 5:32; 2 Kings 22:2).