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**Drive of Discipleship**

by Jason Ingolfsland

He appeared in my driveway 15 minutes after hanging up the phone, a record time. It was approximately 9pm at night on a Tuesday. We were both busy men with all the responsibilities and obligations that come with men of our age, but I needed to speak with him and he always made time if I asked. A courtesy I deeply appreciated.

I quickly grabbed my coat and put on my shoes to head out. Heavy torrents of rain met me as I raced out of my house and covered up my head with my coat. The storm came down so hard that it didn’t do much good. My body drenched from head to toe, I sloshed my way into his car and slammed the door shut. The windshield wipers whizzed back and forth, failing to clear the water away, and the radio played a rock song I didn’t recognize. Howard loved old 70s rock.

I reached over to shake his hand, not expecting a light spray of water to spread across his dashboard. “Sorry about that,” I said, wiping the water off with my hand.

“It’s just water,” he said, smiling. He had a warm, fatherly grin, something that never failed to soothe my nerves. He put the car in reverse and pulled out into the road.

“You sure you don’t want to just talk at my place?” I asked. “This storm looks malicious.”

He put the car in drive. “If you want to talk,” he started, “we talk in the car. Rain or shine. Night or day. Just you, me and the dashboard. Remember?”

I nodded. The steadfast routine we built couldn’t be altered. Howard was a man of principle which made him come off as a stubborn old goat. Either way, the car *was* the logical choice. Howard and I met on the road. At the time, I drifted from place to place, homeless and alone, angry at myself and God and the world. I didn’t believe in God then, but I still harbored a boiling anger against him. There’s no use trying to explain the contradiction. We’re all full of them. Either way, it was who I was, and I didn’t plan on changing.

Most of the time I’d hitchhike and when I got real hungry or needed extra cash I’d sign on the street with a piece of cardboard I found in a dumpster. Standing on the street corner and signing took a lot of patience. Most people drove on by, not giving a care in the world for a dirty, bearded wanderer like myself. The occasional soul might drop a few dollars or granola bar, but not many. One afternoon, when the sun beat down on my head, I walked down the highway with my thumb out, hoping to catch a ride. Howard pulled up in the same car he always drove.

“Where ya headed?” he asked.

I told him.

“Hop in. I’ll take ya,” he said.

Happy to get out of the heat, I got in the car, hoping he had air conditioning and wouldn’t talk my ear off on the way.

He never did take me to where I wanted to go. But he did talk my ear off.

The car kept us enclosed. You couldn’t run from the problem, but it still felt like you could, being on the open road. We talked for hours at a time. Some nights we didn’t solve a thing, but it felt good to just lay it out on the dash and let God settle the rest. That night, fighting through the storm, I needed something solved. I couldn’t go back without an answer; it wasn’t an option.

Fifteen long and silent minutes passed and the rain didn’t let up. It came down even harder. Howard drove like a pro, though. Not once did he look nervous or afraid. I thrummed my fingers against my knees, trying to think of how to start. Most times, Howard didn’t say a word. He let me think it out, knowing eventually I’d start jabbering.

“I guess I’ll start,” I said, “by saying this is going to sound ridiculous and blown way out of proportion. You’ll probably even laugh at me and…”

“I won’t laugh,” he said.

“Okay, well, you know, things at church have been going really well. The last three years have *radically* changed my life. I’ve learned a lot and I know God’s been working through that. I know he has. I just...I don’t know...I…”

“What?”

“The other day a young kid came up to me, probably about 24 or 25, and asked me if I’d consider being his mentor.”

“That’s great!”

“No,” I said, nervously combing my right hand through my thick black hair and shaking my head. “It’s all wrong. I can’t be anyone’s mentor, Howard. Who am I? I’m still a failure, a loser, a drifter who can’t hold a job. I *can’t* be anything more to anyone else.”

Howard was quiet. He kept his eyes on the road. The yellow lights from the other cars cutting through the torrents of rain. Their tires created waves of water as they passed.

“So, yeah, I guess I just needed to hear what you thought. How do I turn him down?”

“Say no,” he said.

I chuckled. “That easy, huh?”

He shrugged. A little smirk grew at the corner of his mouth. “Isn’t it, though? If you really think you have nothing to give him, you just say no.” He paused a second and glanced over at me. “But, I think we both know the truth. I think what you really want is validation,” Howard said. “I gotta tell you. I can’t give it to you. Not because there’s nothing to give but because it’s been given.”

“Look, I didn’t call you in the middle of a storm so you could build up my ego. I honestly don’t know how to tell this kid no.”

“You ever wonder why Jesus didn’t hunt down the best and the brightest?” he asked.

I didn’t reply, but merely raised an eyebrow.

“If you’re going to start a religious revolution, why wouldn’t you get the people you knew understood theology and the scriptures? Skilled, intelligent people. Right? With strong resumes and a long genealogy of god-fearing grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, and uncles. If you really think about it, it’s kind of insane Jesus walked up to some dirty uneducated dudes and trained them to lead other people.”

“I see where you’re going with this, but I don’t think…”

“You’re right. You don’t think. I’m surprised you haven’t taken on more disciples already.”

“Look, this kid deserves better,” I said. “I was thinking of referring him to someone else.”

“Like who?”

“I don’t know. Someone like you. Someone that can show him what it’s actually like to be a good Christian.”

Howard balked. “A *good* Christian? Define that.”

I gnashed my teeth. My lips grew thin and my nose crinkled up. It didn’t take much to push my buttons, and he knew all of them. I wasn’t in the mood to debate him and the itch to escape slithered up my cowardly back and into my fingers. I wanted to grab hold of the handlebar to open the door and leap out in the cold pouring rain.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I started with an extra helping of snark and contempt. “Someone who doesn’t have the baggage of a drifter who hated God and had nothing to live for. Someone who can tell him stories about living honestly and selflessly rather than stories about lying, cheating and stealing straight into a ditch on I-94.”

“You’re a new creation. The old is gone.”

I waved my hands in the air, frustrated. “Then why doesn’t anyone else see that? Why don’t I? It’s been *three years*, Howard. And I still just feel like running. I feel like slipping back to the old ways.”

“Clearly, this kid, whatever his name, sees it.”

That shut me up. I lowered my head and looked out the window. The darkness outside encompassed the car. I couldn’t see anything except my pale reflection, frowning.

“You made a decision so many years ago to put your faith in Jesus. It’s time to start taking others along for the ride,” Howard said.

“You think I should say yes,” I said solemnly, still looking out the window.

“Ain’t that the obvious,” he said.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “I can’t believe you’re talking me into this. I don’t know. What do *you* think a good Christian is? You think I’m one?”

Howard scratched the side of his cheek with his right hand and puckered his lips to the side. “Look, Billy, a good Christian…” he started.

Bright white headlights appeared and expanded like the sun making a collision course with Earth. There was no time to think. No time to do anything but sit and wait for the doom that approached us. The impact roared like a jackhammer, shattering glass, crunching metal, devouring the space between us. Our skulls knocked around like bowling pins, jostling our bodies to and fro with only our seat belts to hold us down. The car tipped and rolled over, spinning like a top, before it all came to a sudden halt. My hearing and vision pulsed in and out. I remember seeing Howard’s body hung upside down limp and lifeless. I remember feeling the cold rain pouring into the car and the floodwaters rushing underneath. I heard screams outside. That was it. The next thing I knew I was in a hospital bed.

I made it out okay with only cuts and bruises. Howard wasn’t so lucky. He survived, but the truck hit his side of the vehicle, causing a lot more damage. He endured months of surgery and recovery. I went to visit him every day, but most days he was asleep. So, we didn’t talk. I prayed over him instead. I made sure he was being taken care of. Sometimes I’d feed him while he was in his cast or push him around in his wheelchair. We never talked about the crash.

Most of our conversation revolved around small talk, the weather, that sort of thing, but never any of the stuff we usually spoke about. One day in his hospital room, I had just come in with lunch and he lay on the bed, reading a book. Rays of sun beamed through the open window and a breeze rushed in. Delighted to see non-hospital food, he set his book down and rubbed his hands together. After we finished our meal, he wiped his mouth and said, “So, you never told me. Are you discipling that kid?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I think it’s going well.”

“Good. Good.”

“Look, about what happened, before the crash, you were going to tell me…”

“Ah, yes,” he interrupted.

“And?”

“Are we in the car?”

“No.”

“Well,” he said with a half smile. “I’ll tell you then.”