

COME BEFORE WINTER

"Do thy diligence to come before winter." II Timothy 4:21.

Napoleon Bonaparte and the Apostle Paul are the most renowned prisoners of history. One was in prison because the peace of the world demanded it; the other, because he sought to give men that peace which the world cannot give and which the world cannot take away. One had the recollection of cities and homes which he had wasted and devastated; the other had the recollection of nations and cities and homes which had been blessed by his presence and cheered by his message. One had shed rivers of blood upon which to float his ambitions. The blood which the other had shed was that which had flowed from his own wounds for Christ's sake. One could trace his path to glory by ghastly trails of the dead which stretched from the Pyrenees to Moscow and from the Pyramids to Mount Tabor. The other could trace his path to prison, death and immortal glory by the hearts he had loved and the souls that he had won to a saving knowledge in Christ.

Napoleon once said, "I love nobody, not even my own brothers." It is not strange, therefore, that at the end of his life, on his rock prison in the South Atlantic, he said, "I wonder if there is anyone in the world who really loves me." But Paul loved all men. From his lonely prison at Rome he sent out messages which glow with love unquenchable and throb with fadeless hope.

Paul had three friends upon whom he could count. The first of these was Jesus Christ, that One who would be the Friend of every man, the Friend who laid down His life for us all. The second was the physician. This friend Paul handed down to immortality with that imperishable encomium, "Luke, the beloved physician." He said, "Only Luke is with me." The third was the young man whose name was Timothy, whom Paul affectionately called, "My son in the faith." Paul and Timothy each had in the other a friend who was born for adversity.

Paul's last letter was to this dearest of his friends, Timothy, whom he had left in charge of the church at far-off Ephesus. He tells Timothy that he wants him to come and be with him at Rome. Anticipating a visit from him, Paul took the opportunity of reminding Timothy of certain personal needs. Some particular articles, dear to him, were at the house of Carpus, at Troas, and in prospect of a dreary winter in prison, he asked Timothy to bring them with him when he came. Note that Paul requested Timothy to "come before winter." Why "before winter"? Because when winter set in the season for navigation closed in the Mediterranean, and it was dangerous for ships to venture out to sea. How dangerous it was, the story of Paul's last shipwreck tells us. If Timothy had waited until winter, he would have had to wait until spring; and Paul had a premonition that he would not live through the winter, for he wrote, "The time of my departure is at hand."

Before winter or never! There are some things which will never be done unless they are done "before winter." The winter will come and pass away, and the flowers of the springtime will bedeck the earth, and the graves of some of our opportunities may be in evidence. There are voices speaking today which a year from now may be silent. It may be "before winter" or never.

I. The Physical Need.

Very likely Paul was seized at the sea-port town of Troas in Asia Minor on the second occasion of his being taken before the Roman emperor. The soldiers usually appropriated to themselves any extra garment in the possession of an arrested person, such things being considered as the perquisites of those who made the arrest. Paul may have been forewarned of his forthcoming seizure, and, therefore, prudently committed his outer garment, books and parchments to the care of Carpus.

Doubtless the cloak was one that he had used many times. It may have been soaked often with the water torrents of Pamphylia, and whitened with the dust of the long Roman

roads, and stained with the brine of shipwreck, when, on the rocky cliffs of Malta, the Euroclydon was driving the waters into foam; he may have slept in its warm shelter on the uplands under the canopy of the stars: it may have covered his trembling limbs, bruised with the brutal rods of the lictors, as he lay that night in the dungeon at Philippi; and now the old man sits shivering in the gloomy prison and, thinking of the old cloak, asks Timothy to bring it to him.

A right thinking person cannot help but admire the great apostle. Even though he was confined to that deep, dark and damp prison, he did not utter one word of complaint. He did not say anything unkind about his enemies. Being reviled, he reviled not again. He did not say unkind things about the people who left him in the lurch. He did not rebuke a single treacherous person. He was just waiting to die, but with a spirit that was serene, patient and kind, very much like that which his Master had when He said: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Worn with service, wearied with travel, emaciated with disease, perhaps tortured with rheumatism, confined in that damp prison, Paul wanted his cloak. The snows and sleets of Italy, as well as the wintry winds, would bring shivering chills. He wanted to be prepared for just such weather as was sure to come. He knew that he had a duty toward his body. He knew that his Heavenly Father did not want him to be exposed to greater risks or perils than were absolutely necessary. Paul was no monkish ascetic. He kept under his body, but he did not neglect to take care of his health. He understood full well that God would not have him incapacitated for further service on account of failure to take care of his physical health. So, he requested Timothy to bring his coat with him when he came.

II. The Social Need.

"Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me." The reason for this request is evident for Paul was left almost alone. He said, "Only Luke is with me." Man is a social being. He is made for fellowship. He is made to feel for and with his fellows. Social fellowship is a joy and a strength to him. Community of views and sympathy of feeling develop him and add to his power. Paul was craving sympathetic and faithful companionship. All of us have this same social need.

III. The Spiritual Need.

"The cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the parchments."

Who is this man for whom books were so necessary? He was a man of the schools. Paul was born and reared at Tarsus, a university center. From Tarsus he went to Jerusalem, where he sat at the feet of Gamaliel. He had the very best training that the schools of that day could give him, but in spite of his excellent training he still found that he needed his books.

Paul not only had the best that the schools could give him, but he was further educated by travel and by association with people. His feet had trod many of the Roman roads. He had visited almost every capital of the Roman world. But, in spite of the fact that he had the best culture that the best schools could give, that he had the very best that could come from travel, yet, he simply could not get along without his books.

Paul had wide experience in the work of the ministry. He had been a preacher of the gospel for more than a quarter of a century. During that time he had preached to all sorts and conditions of men. He had prepared and delivered numerous sermons. He had written books that will live as long as literature lasts, but he did not feel that he could rest upon his laurels. He must keep reading. He must keep preparing new sermons. After more than twenty-five diligent, earnest and fruitful years, he still could not

get alone without his books. He still had a strong desire for more and greater knowledge. He never would have made such an ignorant statement as the person who said, "A minister should never read or quote any book but the Bible." Paul was a persistent reader and a thorough scholar. He knew that learning need not hinder usefulness, but that ignorance would frustrate much good. Even an apostle of our Lord must read. Paul had written the major portion of the New Testament, but still he needed and wanted books.

Paul was a man of vast intellectual ability and of marked originality. No man of his day had a keener intellect. He was a daring thinker. But in spite of his vast ability and marked originality, he felt that he simply could not get along without his books. Even though he was brilliant and gifted he needed his books.

Of all the legacies that have come down to us from the past, by far the most valuable is that of books. Marvelous, indeed, is that power by which the master minds of all ages have made for themselves a place in the heart and life of the generations which have followed them.

We ought to read good books. They will never leave us nor forsake us. We ought to read for the sheer joy of it; for the delight that it brings us "to lose ourselves in other men's minds." We should read for information. Bacon said, "Reading makes a full man." Then, we ought to read for inspiration. The books of inspiration are more lasting than the books of information.

By means of good books we enter into the presence and society of those whose company is most worthy of being sought after, and they, in turn, may bring us into contact with others, greater even than themselves. Books provide companionship with the best and the greatest. Thoughts which have brought incalculable benefit to the world have, through the medium of books, been passed down the centuries, and men, long since dead, speak to their fellow men forever. Many a person has dated a new era in his life from the perusal of a good book.

Suppose that Timothy, when he received that letter from Paul asking him to come before winter, had said to himself: "Yes, I shall start for Rome; but first of all I must clear up some matters here at Ephesus, and then go down to Miletus to ordain elders there, and thence over to Colossae to observe the Lord's Supper." When he had attended to those matters, he might have started for Troas, and there inquired as to when he could get a ship which would carry him across to Macedonia, and thence to Italy, or one that was sailing around Greece into the Mediterranean. He would have been told that the season for navigation is over and that no vessels will sail till springtime. "No ships for Italy till April!"

All through that anxious winter Timothy would have reproached himself that he had not gone at once when he received Paul's letter. Had he delayed, he would have discovered in the springtime that Paul had been beheaded long since. In that event, he certainly would have wished that he had come before winter.

I hope that the preaching of this sermon on, "Come before winter" shall cause some of you to do that which shall make your hearts glad in the years to come.

Twice coming to the sleeping disciples whom He had asked to watch with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ awakened them and said with sad surprise, "What, could ye not watch with Me one hour?" When He came the third time and found them sleeping, He looked down upon them sadly and said, "Sleep on now, and take your rest." Never again could those sleeping disciples ever watch with Jesus Christ in His hour of agony. That opportunity was gone forever. You say, when you hear that a friend has gone, "Why, it hardly seems possible! I saw him just yesterday." Yes, you saw him yesterday, and you intended to speak a word of appreciation, or show this act of kindness, but now the vacant chair or the empty place will speak to you with a reproach which your heart can hardly endure.

The greatest subject which can engage the mind and attention of men is eternal life. Hence the Holy Spirit, when He invites men to come to Christ, never says "Tomorrow," but always "Today." He always says, "Today," never "Tomorrow." "Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." The reason for this urgency is twofold. First, there is the uncertainty of human life. Second, tomorrow the attitude of one's heart may have changed. Common sense, experience, conscience, God's Word, the Holy Spirit and Christ repeat with me, "Come before winter." In other words, come to Christ before life is over and you stand before God to give an account of the use you have made of the opportunities which He has granted to you. "Come before winter."