

DEMAS THE DESERTER

"There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers." Philemon 23-24.

"Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you." Colossians 4:14.

"For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica." II Timothy 4:10.

One of the saddest and most affecting stories is the account of the punishment of deserters in the army. Nothing, even in a battle, is so blood-chilling and horrible. It is an act that strikes dead into the heart of the bravest soldiers and sends a shudder through everyone who has ever witnessed it. And why is the deserter's doom made so horrible? Simply because the crime of desertion is so great, and the consequences of the crime so fatal to the interests of an army and of the causes for which an army fights. If desertion will destroy an army, then the army must destroy desertion. It is because of the danger which the deserter brings to his comrades, and because of the demoralizing effect which he has on the army, that his crime is punished so signally. History has put the brand of infamy on more than one deserter of his country, or of a sacred cause. Benedict Arnold stands forth prominently in American history, indelibly marked as a deserter, and shot through with the volleys of a nation's abhorrence. In the Bible history there hangs Judas the arch-deserter. In our text we read of another whose name was Demas.

Among all the portraits of the New Testament there is none more arresting, more solemn in its suggestiveness, more eloquent in its appeal, than this of Demas, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present age."

These words were written by Paul in circumstances of trial and loneliness. He was in the Mamertine prison at Rome, and the end of his course was in sight. He knew full well that his only escape from captivity was by the gate of martyrdom, but his own fate occasioned him no concern. His keenest suffering came from the defection of his friends, those whom he loved abundantly but who had themselves repaid his love with cold disloyalty. Conspicuous among them was Demas, of whom, save in this matter of his desertion, we know but little.

Knowing that death was drawing near, and awaiting the end, Paul looked back into the past, on into the future, and around at the immediate circumstances of the hour. When he looked back his soul was filled with triumph: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." He looked on to the future, but there was not a word about the coming pain; no mention of the axe, and the executioner, and the shame; but rather a look beyond the executioner, and the axe, and the block, and the pain, through death: "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give to me at that day: and not only to me, but also to all them that have loved His appearing."

His backward look filled him with triumph; his onward look filled him with confidence; and his look around him filled him with loneliness. He said, "Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me; for Demas forsook me, having loved this present world, and went to Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me." Paul was alone, save for the companionship of Luke. Crescens was away. Titus was away. Timothy was away. And Mark was away. But they were all away upon business for the King, and even though he missed them he thought of them with gladness. But there was one whose absence filled his heart with sorrow: "Demas hath forsaken me," not on the King's business, but "having loved this present age."

Demas had once been quite active in the service of the Lord. Paul had previously written to Philemon, and in closing that letter he wrote: "There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow labourers." These words not only indicate that Demas was once quite active in the work of the Lord with Paul, but also that he had been closely associated with other great Christian characters. Few men have enjoyed such advantages as were granted to Demas. He was the intimate friend and associate of the greatest Christian of his day. He was Paul's cherished companion, and often heard the great apostle preach. He prayed with him and came under the spell of his radiant personality.

When Paul wrote to the Colossians, his closing salutation reads, "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you." Note that this reference to Demas is devoid of commendation. Paul merely mentions his name and that is all. To some people that would not be strange, but it is significant in the case of Paul. Being a devoted Christian he was endowed with the grace of appreciation. When he mentioned a fellow Christian, he usually said something pleasant and complimentary about him, and expressed grateful appreciation for him. That was a mark of a generous spirit and of a good habit. But of Demas, in this case, Paul said nothing.

"Demas hath forsaken me," That is a disappointing sentence. It mentions a tragic breakdown. But if this sentence tells of a disappointing present it also tells of a glorious past. It reminds us of that good day in the life of Demas when he was the companion of Paul. Demas had been powerfully affected by the preaching of Paul. For a little while he had been most zealous in the work of the Lord. He had followed the Apostles everywhere. He had shared the great hopes of the missionary saint with whom he was associated. He participated in his daring dreams. He also shared in his efforts toward the realization of those dreams. When Paul had gone forth to preach the Gospel, Demas had walked by his side. When Paul had faced dangers, Demas had faced those dangers with him. When the foundation of a new church was laid, Demas was there. Demas had shared Paul's vision and his task.

But that experience is of yesterday. That fascinating and heroic chapter is in the past. Demas is not found at the side of Paul any more. He no longer shares in Paul's dreams. He no longer labors at the high task that engaged his great-hearted friend. And Paul writes with a sorrow that wets his face with tears, "Demas hath forsaken me." That sentence is one of the saddest statements in Christian history. It tells us three things: --

I. What Demas Did.

Sinners against great light and great love Demas forsook Paul. Paul had regarded him with warm affection, and had awarded him the honor due to a fellow-laborer in the Lord. Demas stood high in Paul's esteem. He had not only professed love to Christ, but he had once suffered for his Christian profession. He had worn the honorable badge of prison chains in the name and for the sake of Christ. The tragedy of Demas is deepened by the reflection that, in all likelihood, he owed practically everything to Paul. Doubtless the Apostle led him to Christ, although we know not where nor how. His heart was touched, his mind was fascinated, and he was drawn to Paul and his Christ with real enthusiasm. Naturally his departure brought great distress to Paul. That is true because Demas had been his friend, because he forsook him at a critical time in his personal history -- when he was already disheartened by other deserters and was soon to face death, and because there was a special need for such as Demas to stand by the Gospel in the city which was the heart of paganism, and to show courage and constancy in persecution.

II. Why Demas Did It.

Did his health fail him? Did his spirit break down? Did he go to labor elsewhere? There was some reason for it. Every person who has ever brought disgrace on his Christian profession, or has fallen away from his church standing had some secret cause of his fall. He deserted under the temptation of some besetting sin. Some underlying cause turned him away. Some specific sin chilled his heart and caused him to beat a retreat.

If we could see the sad roll of all open deserters, and read the specific sins, we would doubtless find specifications like these: "Deserted because of moral cowardice," or "Deserted through neglect of prayer," or "Deserted through the influence of bad associates," or "Deserted through love of the world."

Demas deserted Paul because of his love for the world. I do not mean that he was immoral or vicious, but he was worldly. He just loved the world more than he loved the Lord. God's Word admonishes us to live separate from the world. "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." This religion won't save you, but it is the kind of religion every saved person ought to have. The child of God is required to keep himself "unspotted from the world."

These three things are noted in this text: --

1. The alluring force -- "this present age."
How did the age allure Demas?

(1) By the enticement of its nearness.

Demas was in Rome and he saw the voluptuousness of its life, the ease and the laughter and the merriment of its wealth. That was to him the present age. Paul had spoken often of an appearing glory presently, but here was glory close at hand. Paul had been leading him along a way of present renunciation and service toward a glory not yet revealed, but all about him were the things that were immediate and near. Demas was conscious of the contrast between the seen and the unseen, the tangible and the intangible, the sensual and the spiritual. The thing that appealed to him was the fact that the "present age" was something that he could be sure of.

(2) By the enticement of its method.

Everything which Demas saw as he travelled was opposed to the teaching of Paul. Paul had been teaching that self-sacrifice was of the very essence of life, that men must be crucified in order to live. In Rome Demas saw men mastered, not by self-sacrifice, but by self-gratification. Paul had been teaching that the noblest law of life was that of service, but Demas saw men in Rome seeking not to serve each other, but how far they could make other men serve them. Being sure of the reality of the unseen, and feeling the lure of the seen, these methods of the present age appealed to him.

(3) By the enticement of its gifts.

The present age offered him wealth, pleasure and liberty. He felt the enticement of the seen as against the unseen, the tangible as against the intangible, the sensual as against the spiritual, the present as against the future.

2. The assenting will -- "having loved."

The Greek word for love here is the highest word it is possible to use -- agapao. This word signifies a deliberate volitional action; love illuminated by judgment, and deciding by will.

3. The active separation -- "Demas hath forsaken me."

Our text implies that if one loves this present age or world he will cease to love God. It implies that the love of the world and the love of Christ cannot dwell in the same heart. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

III. Where Demas Went.

"And went to Thessalonica." When you mention the name of that great and powerful city of the ancient Empire, you think of a city in which the time-spirit was incarnate. Thessalonica was at once luxury-loving, pleasure-seeking and idol-worshipping. Demas went to Thessalonica, but he did not get what he went for. No man ever does. Selfishness, love of pleasure, questionable companionship, and neglect of his spiritual life led him to Thessalonica.

This text is a warning to all of us. It instructs us to beware of over-confidence. It urges all to guard against a presumptuous confidence. "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." I Corinthians 12:10. It instructs us to guard against a decay in our spiritual affections. It informs us that if we have deserted the Lord, the door of mercy is not yet closed against us. As long as one remains in the body God says, "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings, and love you freely." Do not follow the example of Demas. If the world has begun to assume controlling power over your life, blinding your vision, sapping your strength, quenching your enthusiasm, and chilling your heart, then --

"Come to His feet and lay open your story
Of sorrow and suffering, of sin and of shame;
For the pardon of sin is the crown of His glory,
And the joy of the Lord to be true to His Name."