

## The Power to See it Through

Philemon 24

Colossians 4:14

2 Timothy 4:10 **For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia.**

CONCERNING one character in the New Testament, mentioned only three times, one suspects that many Christians have not even heard — Demas. He illustrates one of the most familiar tragedies in human life — a fine beginning and a poor ending. **He lacked the power to see it through.** First, in Paul's letter to Philemon, we read, "Demas, Luke, my fellow-workers." So Demas, along with Luke, and named first at that, was standing by Paul in his Roman imprisonment, a devoted and promising disciple. Second, in Paul's letter to the Colossians, we read, "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas." Reading that, one wonders why Demas and Luke, who were praised together at the first, were separated in this passage as though Luke indeed retained Paul's confidence as "the beloved physician" but Demas had become merely "Demas." Third, in the second letter to Timothy, incorporating, we suppose, one of the last messages Paul ever wrote, we read, "Demas forsook me, having loved this present age." Three points on a curve, that enable us to plot its graph! For here is the story of a man who made an excellent beginning and a wretched ending: Demas, my fellow-worker; Demas; Demas forsook me.

Intimate companions of Paul in the Roman circle, Luke and Demas must have known each other very well. **Now, Luke is the only narrator of Jesus' life whose Gospel records the parable about the man who started to build a tower and was not able to finish.** Matthew did not refer to that, nor Mark, nor John — only Luke. **One wonders if he remembered it because of Demas. Demas was slipping, let us say.** Through Paul's little group in Rome anxious apprehension ran that Demas was not holding out, and one imagines Luke pleading with his friend. The Master himself, he might have said, warned his first disciples about the peril which is besetting you. For once he said, "Which of you, desiring to build a tower, doth not first sit down and count the cost, whether he have wherewith to complete it? Lest

haply, when he hath laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all that behold begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.”

**So one thinks of Luke pleading with his friend.**

At least Luke, alone among the evangelists, put the parable into his Gospel. He had seen its truth too vividly illustrated ever to forget it: Demas, my fellow-worker; Demas; Demas forsook me.

**Obviously the qualities which make a good start possible are not identical with the qualities which see life through to the end.** In no realm are starting power and staying power the same thing. A ship can make a grand getaway at the launching only to make a poor stand later against the fury of the waves and winds when the northeasters are unleashed. **So one sees in Demas a character — how familiar! — capable of fine impulses, generous responses, idealistic loyalties, and eager loves; only he lacked staying power.**

But for all that, some of us are Demas and all of us know we could have been. Over what thin ice have we skated! How easily we could have broken through! **How many of us here have already fallen far from a faith that once was strong and a character that once was clean!** We know Demas. The mirror shows him to us. Introspection reveals the process of his downfall. Nearly two thousand years ago he lived and died, his very name barely preserved, as though by accident, and yet how vivid he is in our imaginations! Demas, my fellow-worker; Demas; Demas forsook me, having loved this present age.

**However beautiful one's beginning, nothing matters much in human life without a good end.** One does not mean that we may demand an outwardly successful and fortunate conclusion, as in old sentimental novels where everything had to come out happily. **But without a *good* end, without morale and staying power and steady character to see a man through to a worthy conclusion, what else in life can be much worth while?** Jesus could have spoiled everything in the Garden of Gethsemane and, had he done that, all for nothing would have gone his unremembered Sermon on the Mount and his unselfish months of ministry. The career of Jesus was like splitting a log. **Every previous blow of the ax is indispensable but it is the last blow that splits it.** So we know there was a Christ, and the rich meanings of his ministry have come to us because he had staying power to go through to the end, where he could say, **“It is finished.”**

What is the most lamentable tragedy in human life? To face suffering, to be cruelly handicapped? Surely not! For we have seen some terribly handicapped people who had such moral staying power that they came through to a great conclusion, all their flags flying when they came into port.

**But there is a tragedy so appalling that, when one has seen it, the very reminiscence of it makes one's blood run cold — to be fortunately born, to have a glorious boyhood, to rise to responsible position, to be loved and trusted, and then to crack as though all the time the shining metal had had a flaw in it, to betray one's trust, deceive one's friends, blow out one's brains!** You see, whether it be in dramatic fashion like that or in homelier wise, where a fine beginning lapses by slow degrees into a disheveled ending, Demas is the tragedy.

In this regard life is like marriage. How beautifully love begins! With what romantic launchings it can get its start! But we elders, who watch the young folks at their lovemaking and their weddings, habitually ask a deeper question. They have qualities that can start a home; have they the qualities that keep one — the deep fidelity, the long-term loyalty, the steady and abiding love that keep a home? For in marriage, as in all life, a good beginning only makes more tragic an unhappy end.

**Do you celebrate the qualities of faith and character that enable a man to see life through.**

**For one thing, staying power is always associated with a certain central integrity of conscience.** Whatever else life may give or may deny, one thing is absolutely indispensable — that a man should not break faith with himself, that he should keep his honor bright in his own eyes, that whatever else may fail he should not inwardly be a failure.

Such quality of conscience, making it indispensable that, whatever happens, a man live on high terms with himself, is of the essence of staying power, and it is the glory of great artists that commonly in their art they have exhibited it.

**As we see Paul and Demas in Rome, it is obvious Paul had *that*.** He would have liked outward good fortune and success could he have had them on honorable terms — of course he would! But whether fortune or misfortune befell,

one thing was absolutely indispensable — he had to keep faith with himself and the Christ within him. Not simply as a matter of duty but as a matter of happiness, that was indispensable. Demas, however, was of another sort. He soon found something else indispensable. **“Demas forsook me,” wrote Paul, “having loved this present age.”**

That is the final difference between people. Paul faced many kinds of failure but he himself was no failure. If, however, the old legend is correct, Demas went back to Thessalonica and became a priest of idols in a pagan temple. He himself was a failure.

**In the second place, staying power is always associated with the experience of being captured by a cause, laid hold on by something greater than oneself to which one gives one’s loyalty — an art, a science, a vocation, a social reform, an object of devotion which one conceives to be more important than oneself.**

They all cared for something superior to themselves to which they gave their long-term loyalty, so that they stood the gaff, as we say, in their individual fortunes, and followed through to a strong conclusion for their causes’ sake. All staying power in character is associated with that.

Christ had never gotten so deep as that into Demas. Demas had laid hold on some of the more comfortable aspects of the Christian gospel, but the Christian gospel had never laid hold on Demas. Demas had possessed himself of this or that detail of Christ’s message, but Christ had not possessed himself of Demas. So the man’s Christianity was a superstructure easily put up, easily taken down “jerry-building on slim foundations. For the foundation of enduring character is always laid in something greater than oneself which one will serve through life and death.

**A fascinating contrast exists between two phrases in the New Testament: the first, Paul’s description of Demas — “having loved this present age”; the second, the description of an apostate in the Epistle to the Hebrews as one who, having “tasted the ... powers of the age to come,” falls away. So, *that* is the gist of the matter as the New Testament sees it. An apostate is a man who loves the *status quo*, this present age; a Christian is a man who tastes the powers, is laid hold on by the hopes, of the age to come.**

When some one tries to tell you that the Christian social gospel is a modern innovation, not in the New Testament, face him with that. The Christian social gospel is in the very heart of the New Testament — set, to be sure, in mental frameworks appropriate to the first century and different from ours but indubitably there. The primary emphasis on the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching and in the first church was so dominant that they tested Christian discipleship by it. A man who loved this present age was an apostate; a man who tasted the powers of the age to come was a Christian.

**Whenever we see a New Testament Christian carrying through to the finish, one fact is always apparent: he had set his devotion on a coming kingdom of God on earth for which he was willing to live or die.**

**Finally, staying power is commonly associated with profound resources of interior strength replenished by great faiths.** "I had fainted, unless I had believed" is a sentence in the Bible that is true of life. We do faint, peter out, go flat, lose our morale, **unless our interior resources are replenished by faith in something. We may be sure that Demas, before he left Paul, had lost some of his first convictions about Christ and the God whom Christ revealed.**

**Deeper yet, a vital faith in God gives a man available resources of interior power.** We do not so much produce power as appropriate it.

**Do you celebrate the resources of a Christian faith to see you through?**