

How to Avoid a Spiritual Failure

In his final hours in Rome, awaiting an inevitable execution, a very lonely apostle Paul suffered some additional heartbreak. "Demas," he wrote, "hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Timothy 4.10). We are left to speculate as to the particulars — what dread fears or powerful allurements led this faithful friend and co-worker to abandon the kingdom of God and to forsake his burdened brother. It was not as though he had fled the field at the first approach of trouble. During Paul's first imprisonment in Rome Demas had evidently been a steadfast companion (Philemon 24; Colossians 4.14). Now, unexpectedly, this heart-mauling betrayal and desertion.

Paul said that Demas "loved this present world." The "world" is many things. John describes it as a way of thinking where lust, materialism and pride abound (1 John 2.15-16). What was it that got to the faithful Demas? Was it fear of death or imprisonment? Or was it something more subtle like a nostalgic longing for the old easy ways free of constant warfare? We are not told which one of these undid Demas but one of them found its mark.

Breaking points can come to us too if we are not very careful. A deep hurt we cannot find it in ourselves to forgive. A disappointing marriage. Failures with our children. Lost health or prosperity. Anything we had never imagined happening to us. And often it's just plain prideful stubbornness. At any rate, don't ever say you'd never do what others have done. You've never been all the places you could be. Peter learned a valuable lesson about that (Matthew 26.31-35). It is far better that we know our own weaknesses and watch and pray that we enter not into temptation (Matthew 26.41). Satan loves an arrogant and self-confident man.

Another lesson to be learned from the failure of others is that those who at last go back, at first look back. Departures of apparent suddenness are really the end of a process. Our Lord warned that those who put their hand to the kingdom plow and look back longingly at the world are not fit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9.62). The disciples who go back are those who first begin to cultivate again the values of the world and like the Israelites in the wilderness grow nostalgic amidst their trials for the fleshpots of Egypt. They forget, of course, the galling bondage that accompanies the life of sin. These are the ones who gradually cease to meditate upon God's word (Psalm 1.1-2), then become prayerless (James 4.1-2) as God and Christ seem far away. First men cease to study, then to pray, and, finally, to care.

Sometimes this all begins as a casual flirtation, a few little compromises dismissed as harmless. Too much time with worldly companions (1 Corinthians 15.33), too much interest in a job (1 Timothy 6.9-10), too much concern with being accepted and making our mark in the world (1 Peter 5.5). Finally, it becomes a passionate love affair that makes us heedless of the injury we do to our Savior, ourselves and others.

Satan is the master of the "short step" method. Slow change is more effective in producing spiritual collapse than sudden departure. The danger of alerting the victim to what is happening is eliminated. We can be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3.12-13). Warning flags need to start flying the moment we feel the slightest ebb in commitment. Beware the spiritual slow leak.

The unfailing answer to this kind of spiritual failure is the daily discipline of an uncompromising dedication which admits of no exceptions and makes quick and humble redress for every transgression. Burn all your bridges and press on to the heavenly mark (Philippians 3.7-14). And if, in spite of everything, you happen to stumble badly, don't let despair destroy you. Remember that everyone who has faltered has not ultimately fallen. We can all thank God for that. John Mark's disgraceful desertion in Pamphylia (Acts 13.13) was not the end of him because he didn't allow it to be. Paul sent for him during his last hours (2 Timothy 4.11) and the Holy Spirit chose him to record the gospel story. We don't have to be like Demas. In the mercy of God we have the privilege of being like John Mark or Peter, and, yes, even Paul.

- by Paul Earnhart

Distinctive Preaching

I cannot conceive of there having ever been a time in all of the history of the church that distinctive preaching was not needed. Perhaps there have been periods of that history in which such preaching was more sorely needed than at other times; but if so, the failure of some to preach a distinctive gospel was responsible for the increase of the need for it. And it may be that there was never a time when the need for distinctive preaching was more imperative than now. We have entirely too much preaching that means nothing, and the need of the hour is for men who have the courage to preach a distinctive message.

- by **W. Curtis Porter**

Things Done Too Soon

Procrastination is a common problem. Often we wait too long to do things that need to be done. Frequently we lack a needed sense of urgency. In all spiritual matters we must guard against the temptation to postpone doing what is right.

However, there is 'another side to that coin.' Sometimes we are too quick to act. In certain areas we need to slow down, move more cautiously, and be careful that we don't do things too soon. For instance:

- Many folks must fight the temptation to grow angry in an instant. They have the proverbial 'hair trigger' and it takes very little to 'set them off.' These people need to learn that "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God," and so they need to be "swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19,20).

- Some are prone to assume the worst about other people without sufficient evidence to support their suspicions. Too often brethren suffer long and bitter alienations that are sinful and unnecessary. We all should remember that real love "is not easily provoked" and "thinketh no evil" (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

- There is an overly quick tendency to presuppose that certain individuals would not be open to the gospel message. We think that they wouldn't listen even if we tried to share the truth with them – so we do nothing. The parable of the sower surely teaches us to sow the seed everywhere, and let it find the true hearts that will receive it (Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23).

- Many parents are rushing their children into premature interest in the opposite sex. They seek opportunities for their adolescent children to develop feelings should be reserved for a later, more mature time. This push to awaken their senses in this emotional 'tinderbox' has left many families 'burned' with the sad consequences.

In these and other significant areas it may be that we need to 'slow down' a little. Think!

- by **Greg Gwin**