

How to Avoid a Spiritual Failure

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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.

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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.