

MEET MR. DEMAS

The first time we meet Mr. Demas is in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Paul is probably writing during his imprisonment in Rome (61-63 A.D.). At the end of his letter, Paul is catching the Colossians up on the news of who is where and what they are doing, and this sentence drops into view: "*Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you.*" (Colossians 4:14)

They may not all be full-blown characters and familiar, but some of us at least recognize the names Paul mentions: Mark, Barnabas, Tychicus, Onesimus, even Aristarchus and Epaphras. Surely we have heard of Luke. But who is Demas?

It is as if Luke and Demas are right there with Paul, the three of them are talking about the Colossian church to which Paul is writing, and the two men say, "Send them our greetings too." And Paul writes it into his letter. There it is, locked into the sacred annals of early church history for all time. Demas is there. He knows Luke and Paul. He sends greetings to fellow Christians at Colossae. His life has been touched in some way by the coming of Jesus and the worldwide upheaval that is flowing in its wake. He is among them. Meet Mr. Demas.

On the other hand, Demas does not raise many connections or associations for most of us. But never mind; we cannot be expected to know a lot about every single person Paul ran into.

There are a lot of "Demases" in everybody's life, aren't there? We meet people; they seem nice enough. We start to get to know their names, start to get interested, maybe start to wonder what they are really like. They each have unending potential, many interesting experiences, a certain wisdom from whatever they have learned and lived through. Demases wander through our lives in a steady stream. We never know when one of them will suddenly come into prominence for us – friend, partner, adversary, spouse, landlord, whatever. But for a while, it is just "Demas." No comment, no adjective, no praise or blame. Just "Demas": "Demas says to say hello." Huh? Oh sure, yeah: "Say hi back." Demas? Who is Demas?

MEET MR. DEMAS

And then again, at the end of Paul's personal letter to Philemon, we run into this: "*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.*" (Philemon 1:24)

This time Demas is not just tacked on at the end, like a possible afterthought or a casual acquaintance who just happens to drop in. Clearly Demas is ranked among Paul's friends and supporters. It is no longer just "Demas." It is "*Demas my fellow worker.*"

As we come to know each other, as respect mounts, as friendship forms, expectations also mount. Without even noticing it most of the time, we begin counting on each other. According to the relationship forming, we begin to expect certain things – certain kinds of interest, support, backing, and, if need be, help. Of course, that is dangerous – both ways. The more we expect and receive from one another, the riskier it is. We start to trust. We start to get more open. That also means we become vulnerable. Isn't that a terror – a *holy* terror? With friendship comes vulnerability. There is no love – no meaningful relationship – without vulnerability. And the stronger the relationship grows, the greater the vulnerability becomes. There are no exceptions! That is partly (mostly) what puts us off from wanting to know God. In any case, it is now "*Demas my fellow worker.*" Demas has become important to Paul.

Finally, in Second Timothy, we hear the last New Testament comment about Demas: "*Make every effort to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me*" – "*Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present age....*" (II Timothy 4:10, NASB, NKJV)

Paul adds that Demas went off to Thessalonica, but we get no other particulars. The page I read is black and white, three languages away, millions of copies later, but you can still feel Paul's pain. Desertion is not pleasant. Betrayal is no fun. I doubt if there is anyone here who has trouble identifying. We try not to let it deter us too much. We work to keep it from ruining other relationships. But it leaves its mark and the pattern is familiar. "*Demas.... Demas my fellow worker.... Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present age.*"

Of course, there are layers of desertion and betrayal. I suspect it is a mark of my immaturity that the ones which bother me most are really the desertions of least consequence. Nevertheless, to me the most obvious and troublesome betrayals are the ones that affect me personally. Usually, in time, I discover that there are even two sides to those stories. Like most of you, I tend to see myself as one of the good guys. I want life to be better for most people, most of the time. In my own way and according to whatever light and energy I have, I work for that. As you know, I think these statements could be made about almost everybody, even when we are in disagreement with each other. It is for this very reason, however, that betrayal is so painful. I have a tendency to feel as if a desertion of me is also a desertion of all the things I believe in. Do you ever catch yourself thinking that way?

If someone disagrees with me, it does not mean they do not love Jesus – unless they say so. If someone leaves this church, it does not mean they are rejecting all Christian churches – unless they say so. It is hard for me to remember that, and I'm not the only one. People going through divorce often feel that their partner is deserting not only them, but the children and a way of life and even God. And we could go on and on. But I wonder if Paul wrestled with it. When Demas deserted him, was that an automatic rejection of Christianity and the church? It would seem so in Demas's case, in that place and time.

At least it reminds me of a much more serious layer of betrayal. Demas did not just desert a new friend or new acquaintance. He did indeed turn his back on more than Paul, the individual. He turned away from a whole cluster of concepts about what LIFE itself was all about. He turned away from a whole new WAY of hoping and caring and believing. He turned away from a movement and a people that would live and die – for generations to come – to change themselves and the world they live in. It may even be that this was why Demas turned away. He may have seen that he was getting deep into more than he had at first realized. He could maybe smell the coming persecutions and economic sanctions against Christians, and martyrdom was already more than an occasional misunderstanding. Paul himself would not last much longer.

MEET MR. DEMAS

In any case, Demas was not just leaving Paul's friendship, though I surely wish we knew what happened and what was said. (Don't you?) Demas also walked out on the church. We never hear of him again. I wonder if he had a pleasant, peaceful life. I wonder if he had a family and lots of friends. I wonder if he ever regretted his decision to leave the Christian Faith. I wonder if he ever came back to it again. After all is said and done, he died also. I wonder how he died, and if he was pleased with his life. I certainly have no knowledge or opinion; I merely wonder. I have seen a lot of Demases wandering through my life, and I have been the Demas wandering through some other people's lives – so I have reason to wonder.

As far as the New Testament record is concerned, Demas missed the boat. He got close to the mission and love of Christ's church, and then he turned away. It is eerie to remember that he was a real flesh-and-blood person. He had hopes and dreams and loved ones and fears, just like you and me. His life seems rather sad, when I think about it in the New Testament context. I suppose it is a great deal sadder that it is also happening all around us still today. How much did Demas desert?

If people betray or desert us on an individual level, that is painful and troublesome and hard. If they desert the church – the people of Jesus on earth – that is a far more severe and wide-reaching decision. There is, of course, a third layer of desertion: to desert Jesus, and all He stands for and came to reveal to us.

That's the big one, of course. We wonder if Demas was in the church long enough to learn or come to know much about the Lord who started it and who, as Holy Spirit, is still at its core. Did Demas betray and desert Jesus too? Suddenly I am not willing to be merely philosophical. I don't mind seeing Demas in others and seeing myself in Demas in all the other ways and on all the other levels, but suddenly it is not all okay anymore. I do not want to be Demas on this level. I do not want to lose or betray this, the most important of all friendships, the most precious of all relationships – the most crucial of all covenant-bond commitments possible in this world! But if I am going to meet Mr. Demas, I guess I have to face the possibility of this desertion too. It is apparently what actually happened for Demas. From all the lesser desertions comes this great desertion. Life is like that.

MEET MR. DEMAS

To hear Paul's assessment, Demas deserted on all three levels, at least for the time being. Paul's one revealing phrase is "*having loved this present age*" – that is, "*Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me.*" Maybe that's only Paul's perspective, but there is no mistaking the implications. Demas found that it was too much for him to look on and live Life with Jesus' Kingdom as his primary reference. The Kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom of God, the spiritual dimension, eternal life – whatever your own language – there is a stark difference between seeing all things with the world's possibilities in mind and seeing all things with heaven's priorities in mind.

Two thousand years ago, Demas decided this world was more important than Christ's church. We are still reading about it because he was wrong. Everything that Demas thought was important is gone, except the record of Christ's church. The only thing of any importance left about his life is the warning he leaves for us. He got close to pay dirt, and he deserted. He almost got to know some of the most daring and exciting and loving people the world has ever known, but he ran out on them. He almost discovered the presence and power and love of Jesus, but something else got his attention first.

Of course, the record is not fair. We do not get to hear from Demas. Maybe he fell in love. Maybe it was his golf game. Maybe he found this great investment opportunity. Maybe he didn't like Paul's personality. We do not know. Doubtless he could have come up with excuses as plausible as ours for living more for this world than for God. Whatever they were, it no longer matters. He goes down in Scripture for all time as one who deserted the church and left Paul in the lurch at a time of crucial need. "*Demas.... Demas my fellow worker.... Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present age.*" He deserted Paul personally. He deserted the church. He apparently turned from Jesus also, in love with the material world.

Jesus seems to have known about Demas since long before Paul met him. He tells a parable about the Sower and the seed, and how the seed falls on different kinds of ground. That is a parable at least partly about Demas. Jesus warns us about counting the cost before we get ourselves too involved with Him. He tells us about setting our hand to the plow and then constantly looking back. That is also to warn us about the potential Demas within us.

MEET MR. DEMAS

Anyway, meet Mr. Demas. He plays a very important part in the New Testament because he reminds us of those who play no part. Poor Demas never got far enough in to know what he was onto. He quit before he had understanding enough to get truly excited. He stayed uncommitted because he did not dig deep enough to see the vision. The WAY of the Christian is the way of strenuousness. It is the soul on fire, the soul hungry, the soul both eager and determined to find the way home to God. Have you counted the cost lately? Are you still willing to pay it? How often do you look back?