

COME BEFORE WINTER

Timothy was a young preacher in charge of the church at Ephesus, located on the west coast of Turkey, and the Apostle Paul was an aged man, several hundred miles away, in prison in Rome. Paul wrote a letter to Timothy and said: "Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me" (2 Timothy 4:9), and in verse 21, he said in essence, "Do your best to come before winter."

Paul had hoped that Timothy (the younger preacher) would come to Rome and spend some time with him in prison—and his hope was that Timothy will do it before winter sets in. And then in verse 13, Paul instructed Timothy to stop at Troas on the way, and pick up his books—and to stop at the house of Carpus and bring a cloak (an outer garment) which Paul had left there.

It was still summer when Paul wrote this letter to Timothy—but winter would be coming soon. Roman prisons were not heated in winter. They were dungeons dug out under government buildings. And when the winter storms began to blow, Paul knew that he would be uncomfortably cold in the damp underground prison, with just ordinary clothing. And so, he urged Timothy to come and bring the cloak—and to come before winter!

The reason that Paul urged Timothy to "come before winter"—was that back in those days, when winter once set in—navigation was virtually closed on the Mediterranean Sea. It was dangerous for ships even to venture out to sea. We can get some concept of the danger by reading the account of Paul's shipwreck sometime earlier (in Acts 27:9-41). Paul had been out on the Mediterranean just a few winters before—and experienced a shipwreck. He knew what it was like to travel in winter. He knew that if Timothy waited until winter had come, he would have to wait until spring—and if he waited until spring, it might be too late! Paul sensed that the day of his execution was fast approaching, and so he wrote this letter appealing to Timothy.

I like to think that Timothy started out and went toward Troas, and picked up the books, and stopped for the cloak at the house of Carpus—and then sailed on to Rome. When he arrived at Rome, he found the Apostle Paul in his prison cell; he likely read to him for a number of days from the Scriptures, and lived with the Apostle during the closing weeks of his life. It seems that when Paul said, *do your best to come before winter*—he was simply saying, *Before winter, Timothy, or never! If you don't do it now; if you don't come before winter—it will be too late.*

Each of the four seasons, you know, has something delightful about it:

I like winter—with its clear, cold nights and its stars that shine so brightly (they look like silver-headed nails driven into the heavens.)

I like spring—with its green grass and its many signs of new life.

I like summer—with its gentle winds in the trees, its long warm evenings, and the songs of the birds.

But most of all, I like autumn—with its mist and haze, its cool morning air, and the beautiful, radiant colors of the leaves.

But think how quickly it all passes!

One week we see the trees in all their splendor, and the leaves in their beautiful color. And the next week the rains fall, and the winds blow, and the trees are stripped of their leaves—and winter is just around the corner!

Autumn is a perfect parable of everything that quickly fades. Every fall season of the year should bring home to us a sense of urgency—the need to respond to life's opportunities. You know—there are some things which are never going to be done, unless they are done "before winter." There are gates of opportunity wide open to us today which next year at this time might be closed forever! In light of this fact, we would like to listen today to several voices that are speaking earnestly—calling us now—which a year from today might very well be forever silent.

1. THE VOICE OF GOD CALLING FOR HOLINESS

It is always right to strive for holiness in our lives. The aim of every Christian should be to move toward perfection. The Psalmist says, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord; and who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart" (Psalm 24:3-4).

And in 2 Corinthians 7:1, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

This is one of our duties—moving on to become more like Jesus.

- holiness is hating what God hates and loving what God loves.
- holiness is measuring everything that crosses our pathway by the standards of the Word of God.
- holiness is bearing with others in patience.
- holiness is laboring to mortify the desires of the body, and to curb evil passions.

It's not that holiness comes to ripeness and perfection all at once, and that all of a sudden one who strives for holiness becomes perfect. Practical holiness is a matter of growth. The very fact that the Christian is told in Hebrews 12:14 to be *following after holiness* (to "pursue" it)—is proof that none of us has reached it perfectly. Otherwise we would not have to pursue it! Nevertheless, our goal should be perfection.

Too often we are contented and satisfied with our imperfections. We don't even try to improve in the area of holiness. We don't set new goals. We tend to be satisfied. Some say, "My dad was a man who became angry when things didn't suit him, and I'm the same way! I can't help it!"

According to the fable—there was a frog stuck in the mud, in a deep rut along a country road. He tried hard to get out of the rut, but he couldn't make it. His slimy little body just stuck in that mud!

Some of his friends (other little frogs) stopped to help him—but they also failed to get him out. And yet, the very next day, one of the helpful little frogs came hopping along the same road. To his surprise he met the frog (who the day before) had been hopelessly caught in the deep rut.

(The frog that had been stuck in the mud, was free again). "Well," the friendly frog said, "I thought you were stuck in that rut for good."

"I was," the first frog said, "but a big truck came along and I had to get out!"

There are tendencies to give up the idea of moving toward perfection, because we say it can't be done anyhow. But the fact is:

- we can grow in holiness, if we want to.
- no one can force us to yield to temptation.

When we flounder in temptation, we let our wills give consent—and we are responsible! All of us must make a commitment:

to lay aside the chains of any evil habit that binds us, and decide that we're going to make a new beginning in life

The Christian life is really a series of new beginnings. Today is your opportunity. Someday (all too soon) every one of us will breathe his last mortal breath—and then our opportunities for cultivating holiness are going to be ended. It might be that if you don't conquer the evil habit that is plaguing your life before this winter sets in—that you'll never conquer it!

I don't know what it is:

- maybe it is failure to look for the coming of Jesus
- maybe it's messing around with another man's wife
- maybe it's slamming the character of other persons with your bitter tongue
- maybe it's wasting time watching silly TV programs, or surfing the internet

Whatever it is—God help us to consider seriously the matter of holiness today:

- because God is holy
- because the price of our redemption is costly
- because next fall at this time, we may not be here!

The opportunity to live for God may be gone forever!

2. THE VOICE OF LOVED ONES CALLING FOR AFFECTION

Matthew tells the account of Jesus (in the house of Simon the Leper)—and he tells how a woman named Mary anointed His head with a precious ointment. When the disciples complained that Mary's costly ointment might have been expended in behalf of the poor, Jesus said, "Ye have the poor always with you, but me ye have not always" (Matthew 26:11). Those words, *I will not always be with you*, describe something that is true about our loved ones. We will not always have them with us.

Life is so uncertain that we never know when we are eating our last meal together, when we are engaging in our last conversation together as a family. We leave home for work (or school, or a hunting trip)—in the morning. We may come back in the evening; we may not.

To younger persons—your dad and mother won't always be with you.

To parents—your little son or daughter might be snatched away in early childhood.

Husbands and wives sometimes are suddenly separated by death.

Thomas Carlyle (the Scottish writer)—a talented man; an excellent writer—had a good wife. But in many ways Carlyle neglected to show her the love and the affection he should have shown her. He was often irritable and impatient with her.

One day she was suddenly snatched away by death, and in a graveyard near the city of London, one can find a tombstone with these words engraved on it: (Thomas Carlyle wrote them; I'm quoting from the epitaph carved on the tombstone of his wife): *"For forty years she was a true and loving helpmate of her husband; she died in London (April, 1866), and was suddenly snatched from him. It seems now as if the light of his whole life has gone out."*

And then he concludes in his diary: *"Oh that I had you yet for just five minutes by my side, so that I might tell you how much I loved you."*

If there's something you want to tell someone who is still living (whether it is in the family or out of the family)—don't wait to do it until the winter of death sweeps them away. I hear people say (when they learn that a friend has suddenly passed on), "Why I think it can't be possible; I saw him only yesterday in the grocery store." You saw him there yesterday, but you'll never see him there again." Maybe you intended to speak a word of appreciation, or show an act of kindness—but now that opportunity (as far as this life is concerned) is gone forever!

And those who have younger children must constantly keep in mind how quickly they grow up. One busy father tells how he was sitting at his desk one evening (with a great deal of work lying before him)—when his bright-faced boy of seven came rushing into the room, and with excitement in his voice—said, "Dad! Tomorrow is your birthday; you're 45 years old; and I'm going to give you 45 kisses, one for each year!" He started to give the kisses, but his dad snapped harshly: *"Go on, Andy, you'll have to leave; I don't have time for your kisses now; I'm too busy tonight!"* The little fellow silently stepped back; his eyes were filled with tears; he said nothing, but it was easy to see that he was disappointed—and with a grieved expression he quietly walked away.

The father says that later on that same evening, he told Andy to come and finish the kisses—but, he says, either he didn't hear him, or else he wasn't in the mood to give them; the boy did not respond to his request. And not too many days after that, the little boy met with an accident, and the waves of a nearby river closed over his body—and a few days after that, he was laid to rest in the village cemetery. The father says (in the account he wrote): *"If only I could tell him how much I regret those thoughtless words I spoke earlier that evening, when I said, 'Go on Andy, you'll have to leave...I'm too busy tonight'—there'd be no man in this whole wide world, so happy as the one who sits here to day, and thinks how he prevented an act (which love inspired in that little boy)."*

Sometimes a husband is slow to express affection to his spouse. Husbands, why not take your wife into your strong arms sometime real soon, and tell her that you love her, and that her price is far above rubies? All too soon, the cold, chilling winds of death are going to snatch our loved ones away—and the opportunities of summer will be gone forever.

3. THE VOICE OF CHRIST CALLING FOR SALVATION

The most profound subject that can even engage the human mind—is the subject of eternal life (the concept of living somewhere forever). And when the voice of Christ calls men and women (boys and girls) to come to Him for salvation—He always urges us to come "today." He never says, "Put it off until tomorrow." He says, "Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Human life is uncertain. James says that life is a vapor that appears for a little time, and then vanishes away (James 4:14). It seems like only yesterday that I was just a boy. I walked barefooted (during the summer-time) through the fields with the carefree abandon of childhood. Then came youth (with its mingled joys), and then suddenly I crossed the bridge into adulthood—and time seems to move with increasing speed as I plunge further into old age! The Bible says, "As for man, his days are as grass; as a flower of the field...the wind passeth over it, and it is gone" (Psalm 103:15-16).

I know that some people take the attitude that death is the end of everything, and that there's nothing beyond. Some believe there's a second chance after death. One-third of all Americans look favorably on re-incarnation, thinking that people are reborn as a higher (or lower) form of life. Others speak about heaven and hell, but don't really believe that they exist. One of my co-workers many years ago, said that he doesn't care whether he goes to heaven or to hell; he said, "I've got friends in both places!" He thought it was a clever remark.

Some of you heard the poem about Solomon Grundy. It says: *"Solomon Grundy was born on Monday; christened on Tuesday, married on Wednesday, taken ill on Thursday, worse on Friday, died on Saturday, buried on Sunday—and that was the end of Solomon Grundy!"* But it wasn't—*not if Solomon Grundy was a real person.*

Jesus says there are two destinies after this life. He says in Matthew 25:46, "These shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal." And we must remember that one becomes "righteous" (that is, he comes into a right-standing with God)—through faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ—not by any works that we do, any liturgy that we recite, or any ordinances that we keep!) The Scriptures say that God has set forth Jesus "to be a propitiation [for our sins] through faith in his blood" (Romans 3:25). The word "propitiation" is a big word but it has a simple meaning: It means "to turn away wrath."

God's wrath is heavy upon us because of our sins; He is displeased with us—but when we believe (with an obedient faith) that Jesus shed His blood on the cross for our sins—God's wrath

is turned away! That's good news! That's *the gospel* as taught in the Bible! That's the heart of the Christian faith! That's the only way by which God's displeasure toward us can be turned away.

Salvation is not a cheap religious exchange—in which for our goodness, God promises to forget our badness. Salvation comes through accepting a Person, and the work He has done on the cross. Salvation is putting our lives at His disposal, and making a commitment to set out doing what He asks us to do!

Each morning as I awake, I try to remember that this could be the day when my earthly labors will come to an end. It could be the day when my wife calls the undertaker—and a few days later it could be that my friends will pay their last respects; and a couple of ministers will say a few words; and the record that I've left behind, will belong to history—and many people will soon forget!

But this prospect is not really frightening—because I've been planning for that day. Some years ago (and this is my testimony) I trusted Jesus as my Saviour (Monday, September 28, 1942). I saw that I was a helpless sinner; I knew that I had violated God's laws over and over again; but I believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, and that He propitiated God's wrath in my behalf. When I was baptized and received into the church, I publicly became a bond-slave of His—and it is my purpose to serve Him until the very moment of death. I made a covenant with God (in Christ Jesus) to be faithful unto death.

What about you today, my friend? If death should tap you on the shoulder and say, "Come with me"—what would you do? One thing is sure; you'd go—but which way would you go? Would it be into Paradise with God, or into a place of outer darkness—separated from the presence of God forever?

By Harold S. Martin