

SECOND CHANCE

It is almost by accident that his name is preserved at all. He was called "Demas". Remember him? If you do not it's understandable. Almost no one else does. Indeed there are only three short sentences about the whole "Demas affair" in the New Testament. You'd think it was some sort of ancient cover-up -- as though they tried to lose him and they almost succeeded -- only three lines remain to tell the tale -- such as it is. The first sentence shows his good start in life, his promise. Paul, in a Roman prison, writes to Philemon and mentions "Demas and Luke, my fellow workers". Now to be with the great apostle, the #1 executive, as his disciple, to be given the title "fellow worker", member of the cabinet -- so to say -- have your name listed even before that of Luke -- is like a law school graduate being made a partner with his name on the door. In other words this is a mighty good start for a young fellow obviously on the way up. But the next time we hear about Demas, the second time his name is mentioned, the wording is different. It's only a mention. In a later letter to the Colossians, Paul speaks of "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas" (period). Luke's name comes first this time and Luke is called "beloved". And Demas is just Demas, like an after thought, not "beloved" and not even called a "fellow worker" this time. Just plain "Demas" -- as thought -- "oh yeah -- Demas -- he's still around". Well what's the matter? What went wrong? Has something happened to him? He started out so bright -- such promise. Has he failed Paul in some way? Have the enticements of the big city -- of that worldly old Rome, led the boy astray? Has he decided it's too short a life to stand by the gospel of Christ when a whole pagan society beckons, "come hither"? Is he slipping? Have Paul and Luke been troubled about him, counseling with him -- "What's the matter, boy, you had such a good start -- so promising a Christian career"? What's happened to you? Well who knows exactly what happened? Not I. But in what was possibly the last letter Paul ever wrote, the second letter to Timothy, there is a third and final mention of "the Demas affair", as though the aging Paul hated to mention it, but thought he ought to, so we read "Demas fell in love with this world, forsook me, having loved this present age". "This present age", -- so Rome was too much for him then, huh? He's fallen in love with "this old wanton present age" -- it's gospel of the good time stronger by far for him than the gospel of God in Christ? No deep convictions to hold him steady -- no vision of an ultimate goal -- just "this present world" -- no staying power. A decent start, this boy -- a good start -- but a bad ending. No perseverance for this young saint. Well everyone knows this is a twice told tale -- indeed, told over and over again -- and for how many of us? Ask yourself -- "Is my name Demas"? -- A good start, sure, -- then a slip, slipping a little here, a little there -- and slipping is always down hill -- then silence -- with no beginning again? Ask

yourself -- "Is that, or is that going to be, the story of me, my life? -- No staying power? No perseverance for this saint?" Tragedy is not beginning under handicap, that's no tragedy, that's a challenge. Neither is meeting pain and suffering along the way a tragedy. But tragedy -- is to be somebody well born, like Demas -- to have all promise, like Demas -- to rise in respect and responsibility, like Demas -- to be loved, like Demas -- trusted, like Demas -- and then not follow through -- but to follow the flow -- give it all up -- to fail in responsibility -- betray the trust -- and end it all some day with either the bang of a pistol or a neurotic whimper -- and never begin again, and again, and again. Not to know that life is a constant series of starts and that you can never stop starting again.

So much then for "the Demas affair". Now what about you and me? What's your name?

Now Mark, the other young man -- he also had a good start in life -- indeed, Barnabas and Paul thought so highly of his background and ability and Christian character that they took him along on the very first missionary journey of the Christian Church and he must have been very happy to go -- it was an honor -- a good beginning for a Christian. And all went well as long as they stayed in familiar territory -- but when they struck out into the difficult and the strange -- Mark's character caught us with him -- his courage was shaken -- he must have thought to himself -- "Three of us against the empire? This Paul is insane -- and he drives us too hard -- night and day -- I'm given out -- the old bear. I want to go home -- back to Jerusalem, back to the familiar -- to be safe again -- this missionary stuff -- too much for me -- I'm sorry, cousin Barnabas, I'm sorry, Paul, sir -- but I'm cutting out, splitting, leaving, quitting, through -- do you understand -- through!"

So -- at a critical moment on the trip -- when the two older men needed him -- he did just that -- he deserted -- back to Jerusalem -- a good start -- this boy, Mark -- but no staying power! Gave out -- gave -- up -- caved in -- yeah -- just another saint without perseverance -- the church is full of them, puddin' head Presbyterians -- for every tough-minded, determined, unshakably dedicated old bear like Paul -- who never gives up -- never calls it quits under any circumstances -- who can sing in jail at midnight until he converts the jailer -- for every one of these tough ones -- there are dozens of us wee timid mice, Christians like Demas and Mark -- who strike out every time we face a struggle -- a strange situation -- who make a good start -- but one crisis -- one little cross -- and we crumble -- one failure and we fade away -- never to be heard from. But, wait a minute -- wait just one minute there -- Demas, yes -- ordinary fellow -- but Mark? -- No. Mark may have made a bad fumble after a brilliant start -- but the boy recovered. He began again. He gave up --

yes -- but he wasn't completely out. And it wasn't easy. You know that. It never is. Once you've given up -- to get back isn't easy. But when you've been thrown -- you've got to get back or all's lost.

So Mark started back. We can only guess at the route he took. Did he first remember that even Father Abraham gave out one time -- had to start again ("And Abraham went up out of Egypt {where his faith had slipped} unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the Lord"). Did he remember that Jacob also had to start anew ("And God said unto Jacob {after he'd disgraced himself and his family}, arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there -- and make there an altar unto God). And did he remember that David had to begin again ("And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord") -- and did he recall that quite recently too -- Peter had to begin again as well -- ("And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter, and Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, before the cock crows, thou shalt deny me thrice. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly").

One thing I am certain of -- I am certain Mark remembered the forgiveness of God that is in Jesus and that for all who want it -- there is a chance to begin again.

Not that we can recoup all our losses quickly (or ever) -- not that the others will take us back over night. God will welcome us back long before some of our family and friends and neighbors do. But never mind them -- just so long as we know that we and God are making a fresh start. Let the others welcome us when they will. God and the soul are the most important. The others will come along. Some may even try for a while to hold us down -- kicking the underdog is some perverse persons' chief sport. Little, mean, narrow, sickly souls will gloat over you when you give up -- glad of it -- when you're down and try to keep you there -- for it's their only hope of feeling important -- to have somebody worse off than they are. But you and God can rise above them.

And the good people -- the ones who count -- they'll finally help you up -- take you back -- the way God does. Peter took Mark back first -- good, kind old Peter -- who knew well from his own experience -- what this younger man was going through. Then Barnabas -- whose very name meant "Son of Comfort" -- he forgave him too. I hope some day -- when you have a chance to help someone begin again -- your middle name will be Barnabas. And finally even Paul -- that tough apostle -- who at first refused to do so -- finally restored

young Mark into his good graces -- writing at the last a very touching note of reconciliation, "Take Mark, and bring him with thee; -- for he is profitable to me for the ministry."

OK -- how easily Mark could have gone the way of Demas -- a good start -- a slip -- and then give up -- to be heard from no more -- but Mark -- who had a good beginning -- learned early the necessity of beginning again. I am of the opinion that he lived to collect and edit the most basic of all the New Testament books we have about the person and work of our Lord -- the Gospel of Mark -- without which our Christianity would be greatly impoverished. How limited would be our understanding of our Lord -- without the perseverance of this young saint.

So -- we have the importance of a good start -- and the supreme importance of knowing that all through life one must start again and again and again -- with God's help. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."