



## **“COME BEFORE WINTER”**

**Kevin Presley**

Colder weather has moved into our southern part of the country over the past few weeks, and it has had me busy at times doing those things we must do when this time of the year approaches. My wife runs a rehabilitation shelter for abused and neglected plants, and it is no small task getting those moved inside or covered up. The faucet covers need to be found and applied. The garden hoses have to be drained and put away. The farther north you live, the longer the list is. And then there are those other end-of-year things in our household or business that need to be attended to before the remaining few days of the year slip away. There are usually preparations of one kind or another that we must make for winter.

The apostle Paul spoke to something of that sort, but about something far more important and more pressing. Winter was coming, and time was getting away. He was in a jail in Rome, and it was near the end of the road for Paul. He needed his younger friend Timothy to come see him. And with what is to me, great pathos but also great urgency, he wrote to Timothy these words, recorded in 2 Timothy 4:9-13: “Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry. And Tychicus have I sent to Ephesus. The cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the parchments.” And then, as he closes his letter, he adds in verse 21: “Do thy diligence to come before winter...”

This text takes us to a dismal place and a sad time in the life of the great Apostle Paul. The last grains of sand are falling through the hourglass of life for Paul, and the final chapter of his dramatic life is being written. He has likely had his final hearing before Nero, and he has probably already been condemned to execution. He doesn't know how long it will be, but he knows that one day he will awaken to his last day on earth. He is reflective and a bit sentimental as he writes his last letter to his beloved protégé and son in the faith, Timothy. Timothy is now far away in the city of Ephesus, doing the work Paul trained him to do. The thoughts of Timothy, faithful in the ministry, must have warmed Paul's heart at this time when he was lonely and sad.

The end of Paul's life was not what many people would think of when they picture the death of a great servant of God. Paul had been deserted, disappointed, and was spending his last days here, in the Mamertine Jail, in Rome. I took these photographs a few years ago while in Rome. The jail is still there in the heart of the ancient Roman forum. A narrow staircase leads into the single room, but those stairs were not there in AD 67. Condemned prisoners, like Paul, were lowered through the hole at the top into this dark, damp, and chilly dungeon where they passed the days until their sentence of execution was carried out. It was a bright and balmy spring day when we were there, with no hint of rain or cold. It was different when Paul wrote to Timothy. The year was beginning to grow late, and Paul knew it wouldn't be long until the first crisp days and chilly nights of fall would come and then usher in the icy winds and rains of winter. He needed several things from Timothy. AND he needed Timothy. He was lonely. He says in verses 10 and 11 that Demas had forsaken him, and only Luke remained. Like an old grandfather who wants to see all his children one last time and calls them to his bedside before he dies, so Paul longs to see his son in the faith again. And he also says in verse 11, that he wanted him to bring John Mark, whom he also longed to see before he died. Being alone is not necessarily a bad thing, but being deserted is a different matter, and Paul longs for Timothy's companionship one more time.

And then, Paul needed his coat. He urges Timothy in verse 13, when he comes, to stop by Troas and pick up the cloak he had left there. He thought of those bitterly cold days and nights ahead and needed that heavy garment to keep him warm. And then there were spiritual needs. He reminded Timothy to bring him the books and the parchments, likely referring to writing material and to copies of the scriptures that he might pass the days studying and writing, doing what he could with what time he had to serve Christ.

But his plea was not only on account that time was short for Paul, but because opportunity was short for Timothy. Timothy needed to come right away because in the fall, the Mediterranean Sea became treacherous to sail, and in the winter, it became impossible, and if he didn't come soon, he would likely not make it, and he would never see Paul again in this life. And so, he closes his letter to Timothy, saying, "Do thy diligence" (which means 'make haste'). In other words, "it's urgent, Timothy, make it a priority. Don't delay! I need you to come before winter."

Life, just like time on earth, is made up of seasons, four of them, in fact. There is the springtime, the bloom of youth. The season of birth and newness. The season of anticipation of the year

ahead. Oh, those precious days of our youth. To the child, they seem like they go on forever, but the time, in fact, quickly passes! We are following Dad to the workshop or following Mom around the house. Without a care or a responsibility, we pass the days at play. We've reached our milestones, then comes that bittersweet day with mother fighting back the tears as we hug her and turn away, and walk into the first day of kindergarten. One by one, those next years pass until we're learning to drive, we get our first car, we start our first job, and then we graduate high school. Childish footsteps no longer echo down the halls of home. Instead, an empty room is left as we go off to college. And those last ties are cut as we launch into a career, fall in love, and get married.

Then it's the long and busy days of summertime. We're in the prime of life as we start a family of our own and establish our own life and home. The children come, one by one. We work and build. We pursue our dreams. We live out the days that we will someday look back upon and say, "those WERE the days..." And it passes so fast. Suddenly, our own children grow and are grown, and they're gone. And we wonder, 'Where did the time go?' We ask the same question our own parents asked: how did they grow up so fast? And we suddenly realize a new season of life is approaching. Our children get married and then come the grandchildren. And we're looking at retirement and how we'll manage in the later years of life. Once rare trips to the doctor become more routine. The waiter begins asking if we get the senior discount, even if we're not quite there yet, but we soon will be. And just as the lush and green trees start to show the first tinges of yellow, a little gray appears at the temples. The knees are stiff when you get out of bed. The joints sometimes ache a bit. And you start to notice that things are slowing down little by little.

Now, it's fall. And in the fall, we, hopefully, enjoy the harvest and rewards of a life carefully planned and well lived. But it's not all fall color, flavored coffee, and pumpkin pie. The first cold fronts bring foreboding hints of what is to come. As the colder winds start to blow, those pretty leaves, one by one, start to fall until the trees are bare, the days short, the nights colder, and skies grayer. And suddenly, it's winter. If you're like me, you get to November and December, and you think it should be May or June. The older we get, the faster it seems to go. Then we keenly feel what the bible says in passages like 1 Chronicles 29:15, "...our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding." Or Psalm 90:10, "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, (that means 70 or 80 years old, which to the young seems like forever. But the Psalmist said...) yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." Job 7:6 says, "My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope." That Hebrew word for 'hope' there relates to a rope or a thread. In other words, we quickly use up our allotted days up and then there are no more. That's the way life is. As the woman of Tekoah so beautifully said in her moving appeal to King David on behalf of Absalom in 2 Samuel 14:14, "For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again..." And of course, James reminds us that our life is like a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanisheth away..." James 4:14.

There are things in life that are pressing. We can't afford to put them off. If Paul's situation was dire and required Timothy's urgent attention, how much more the things of the soul and eternity when we only have a short and fragile time on earth to prepare. Winter is on the way, and it will arrive faster than any of us thinks it will, and it will be too late to do what we should have already done. Paul once said: "See then that ye walk circumspectly, (accurately, exactly, or carefully) not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, (making the use of the time we're given) because the days are evil." (Ephesians 5:15-16) But so many waste the passing days of life and let the precious and few opportunities God gives slip through their fingers. Paul is saying, 'Come before winter' because winter is coming.

Maybe you know that you need to obey the gospel; that you need to be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins (Acts 2:38) and be added to the church. You know that you need to be living a Christian life and setting your spiritual house in order, but you put it off week after week, month after month, year after year, until life is gone and opportunity passed. There's a dear couple in the senior years of life who live in Oklahoma. They were longtime viewers of this program. They watched for weeks upon weeks and knew they needed to obey the Lord. They finally got in the car one Sunday morning and drove to the nearby congregation they had seen advertised on the broadcast. They pulled in and sat in the parking lot, but they lost their courage, and they turned around and went home. The next Sunday, they tried again, but this time they went inside, and when the invitation was extended, they both walked down the aisle in faith and repentance, confessed the Lord, and were baptized into Christ that same hour. They're both wonderful Christians and are strong members of the Lord's church there, and I love them both. There are others, though, who don't ever act on what they know they need to do. They listen, maybe the truth convicts them, but they don't do anything about it. The weeks come and go, and it becomes just another Sunday, another program, another sermon, and maybe they even quit watching at some point. They got close to the kingdom, but they never entered. Excuses, trivial reasons, hang-ups, and holdups held them back. It never seemed urgent. It never seemed like a matter of life and death, and so they remain as they were. And then life slips away, and suddenly comes winter. 2 Corinthians 6:2 "...behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

And there are other things that are pressing and that we need to do before winter. Paul had work to do while he still had time. He implores Timothy to bring him the books and the parchments. The word for books, here, likely refers to scrolls of papyrus. They were the common material used for writing. We don't know what those scrolls contained. The expositors have about as many suggestions as there are expositors. Some think they were scrolls containing the writings of thinkers and philosophers, and that the keen and academic mind of Paul wanted something to read to pass the long days in prison. Others suggest that they were blank scrolls that Paul had left and wanted so that he could continue to write. Perhaps Paul had many things he still wanted to impart to the churches and to his beloved friends in the faith, and he wanted to do it before he died.

Then he says, for Timothy to bring the parchments to him. Scholars are generally united that these refer to the various copies of Old Testament writings. Isn't it telling that Paul, the great

apostle of Christ; one who was directly inspired by the Spirit of God; the erudite student of Gamaliel; the man who had already written the majority of what would constitute the New Testament; that man who knew the Jewish faith from his youth and who was now the aged and dean of New Testament theology; that he wanted printed copies of the Old Testament with him to read and study? That should make most of us feel ashamed. Paul wanted to spend the few, fleeting days of his life learning more about God and perhaps still passing more of that knowledge to others. No matter where he was, what or who he was chained to, whatever problems and pains and difficulties he was personally going through, Paul saw every single day as a ripened field of labor for the Lord, and he would use every last day to do all he could for Christ.

There were also people he wanted to see before winter. He told Timothy to bring Mark with him when he came. That's the same Mark who penned the second gospel. That's the same Mark who was laboring like Timothy in the kingdom. But it's also the same John Mark who had so disappointed and disgusted Paul 20 years earlier when he abandoned Paul and left the work when Paul needed him there. It was such a point of contention that it led to Paul and his co-worker Barnabas parting ways. But John Mark had grown up. Things had changed in those later years. A lot of time had passed, and a lot of water had gone under the bridge, and Paul had forgiven Mark and considered him 'profitable to him in the ministry'. It's rather moving to me that as Paul is taking stock of his storied life, as he thought back through the years with its hills and valleys, its triumphs and its challenges, his many friends and his many foes, his mind went to John Mark, and he told Timothy, I want to see him again.

Are there people in your life that you've been distant and estranged from? Are there broken relationships, and is there bitterness, and are there grudges, maybe going back years? Were harsh words spoken, a friendship broken, parents or children forsaken, a fellowship severed? One day, those things will seem in a very different light when winter comes, and the end is near. I was with a dying woman not long ago who had a son who brought her much worry in life. He had been the source of a lot of disappointment and heartache and care. She spent more than a week on her deathbed asking about him and wondering if he was even alive. He was, and he even knew she was dying, but he never called. She left this life with an undying mother's love that felt unrequited. And as you would expect of a mother, she still loved him as much as the day he was born, and as she drew her final breaths, she just had to leave that for God to work out, and she left all of those cares behind to go be at peace. But she left behind a son who, if he still has a conscience, will have to live with some bitter regrets. And many people don't come before winter, and they regret it for the rest of their lives, and many for eternity. Make those phone calls, pay those visits, make apologies, or make those humble appeals for reconciliation and forgiveness today while you can.

And that makes me wonder: did Timothy and Mark make it? I think there's some evidence that Timothy did reach Paul, and I'm glad if that is true. Wouldn't you like to imagine that when Paul's letter came, Timothy thought, Oh, it's dire! Paul needs me, and I must get to Rome!" You want to think that he left whatever he was doing; that he quickly gathered his things, hurried to Troas to fetch Paul's coat, and to gather the scrolls under his arm, took John Mark, found a ship,

paid his fare, and sailed to Rome just in time. Someone led them to the Mamertine Jail, and a happy reunion took place as the dying apostle saw the love and devotion of these two young preachers. Maybe Timothy even stayed and followed as they took Paul and led him out the Via Ostiensis outside the city, and a soldier beheaded him. And as hard as that was to watch, how Timothy must have thought, “I’m so glad I made it.”

But what if it was different? What if Timothy said, “I sure want to go see Paul, but I’ve got sermons to prepare, church work to be done, home fires to tend. I’ll get there, just be patient. And maybe the day finally came that Timothy made enough time and went to the seashore, but the last ship had sailed. Or perhaps he wanted just long enough to catch the last ship to Italy. He raced from the ship into the city of Rome and met some Christians there and asked them where to find Paul. And sadness washed over their face as they said, “Didn’t you hear Timothy? Paul didn’t make it. They came just a few days ago and took Paul out of the city and executed him. He kept talking about you, Timothy, and hoping you would come...” And how that would have broken the heart of Timothy and left him with regret and remorse. Friend, that’s how it will one day be for you and me if we don’t ‘Come Before Winter’ and do the things we need to do while we can still do them.

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