

Come Before Winter

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by Clarence Macartney

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“Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me.... Do thy diligence to come before winter” (2 Timothy 4:9, 21)

Napoleon Bonaparte and the Apostle Paul are the most renowned prisoners of history. One was in prison because the peace of the world demanded it; the other because he sought to give to men that peace which the world cannot give and which the world cannot take away. One had the recollection of cities and homes which he had wasted and devastated; the other had the recollection of homes and cities and nations which had been blessed by his presence and cheered by his message. One had shed rivers of blood upon which to float his ambitions. The only blood the other had shed was that which had flowed from his own wounds for Christ's sake. One could trace his path to glory by ghastly trails of the dead which stretched from the Pyrenees to Moscow and from the Pyramids to Mount Tabor. The other could trace his path to prison, death, and immortal glory by the hearts that he had loved and the souls that he had gathered into the Kingdom of God.

Napoleon once said,

“I love nobody, not even my own brothers.” It is not strange, therefore, that at the end of his life, on his rock prison in the South Atlantic, he said, “I wonder if there is anyone in the world who really loves me.”

But Paul loved all men. His heart was the heart of the world, and from his lonely prison at Rome he sent out messages which glow with love unquenchable and throb with fadeless hope.

When a man enters the straits of life, he is fortunate if he has a few friends upon whom he can count to the uttermost. Paul had three such friends. The first of these three, whose name needs no mention, was that One who would be the friend of every man, the friend who laid down his life for us all. The second was that man whose face is almost the first, and almost the last, we see in life — the physician. This friend Paul handed down to immortality with that imperishable encomium, “Luke, the beloved physician,” and again, “Only Luke is with me.” The third of these friends was the Lycaonian youth Timothy, half Hebrew and half Greek, whom Paul affectionately called “My son in the faith.” When Paul had been stoned by the mob at Lystra in the highlands of Asia Minor and was dragged out of the city gates and left for dead, perhaps it was Timothy who, when the night had come down, and the passions of the mob had subsided, went out of the city gates to search amid stones and rubbish until he found the wounded, bleeding body of Paul and, putting his arm about the Apostle's neck, wiped the blood stains from his face, poured the cordial down his lips and then took him home to the house of his godly grandmother Lois and his pious mother Eunice. If you form a friendship in a shipwreck, you never forget the friend. The hammer of adversity welds human hearts into an indissoluble amalgamation. Paul and Timothy each had in the other a friend who was born for adversity.

Paul's last letter is to this dearest of his friends, Timothy, whom he has left in charge of the church at far-off Ephesus. He tells Timothy that he wants him to come and be with him at Rome. He is to stop at Troas on the way and pick up his books, for Paul is a scholar even to the end. Make friends with good books. They will never leave you nor forsake you. He is to bring the cloak, too, which Paul had left at the house of Carpus in Troas. What a robe the Church would weave for Paul today if it had that opportunity! But this is the only robe that Paul possesses. It has been wet with the brine of the Mediterranean, white with the snows of Galatia, yellow with the dust of the Egnatian Way and crimson with the blood of his wounds for the sake of Christ. It is getting cold at Rome, for the summer is waning, and Paul wants his robe to keep him warm. But most of all Paul wants Timothy to bring himself. “Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me,” he writes; and then, just before the close of the letter, he says, “Do thy diligence to come before winter.”

Why “before winter”? Because when winter set in the season for navigation closed in the Mediterranean and it was dangerous for ships to venture out to sea. How dangerous it was, the story of Paul's last shipwreck tells us. If Timothy waits until winter, he will have to wait until spring; and Paul has a premonition that he will not last out the winter, for he says, “The time of my departure is at hand.” We like to think that Timothy did not wait a single day after that letter from Paul reached him at Ephesus, but started at once to Troas, where he picked up the books and the old cloak in the house of Carpus, then sailed past Samothrace to Neapolis, and thence traveled by the Egnatian Way across the plains of Philippi and through Macedonia to the Adriatic, where he took ship to Brundisium, and then went up the Appian Way to Rome, where he found Paul in his prison, read to him from the Old Testament, wrote his last letters, walked with him to the place of execution near the Pyramid of Cestius, and saw him receive the crown of glory.

Before winter or never! There are some things which will never be done unless they are done “before winter.” The winter will come

and the winter will pass, and the flowers of the springtime will deck the breast of the earth, and the graves of some of our opportunities, perhaps the grave of our dearest friend. There are golden gates wide open on this autumn day, but next October they will be forever shut. There are tides of opportunity running now at the flood. Next October they will be at the ebb. There are voices speaking today which a year from today will be silent. Before winter or never!

I like all seasons. I like winter with its clear, cold nights and the stars like silver-headed nails driven into the vault of heaven. I like spring with its green growth, its flowing streams, its revirescent hope. I like summer with the litany of gentle winds in the tops of the trees, its long evenings and the songs of its birds. But best of all I like autumn. I like its mist and haze, its cool morning air, its field strewn with the blue aster and the goldenrod; the radiant livery of the forests — “yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red.” But how quickly the autumn passes! It is the perfect parable of all that fades. Yesterday I saw the forests in all their splendor, and Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

But tomorrow the rain will fall, the winds will blow, and the trees will be stripped and barren. Therefore, every returning autumn brings home to me the sense of the preciousness of life’s opportunities — their beauty, but also their brevity. It fills me with the desire to say not merely something about the way that leads to life eternal but, with the help of God, something which shall move men to take the way of life now, today. Taking our suggestion, then, from this message of Paul in the prison at Rome to Timothy in far-off Ephesus — “Come before winter” — let us listen to some of those voices which now are speaking so earnestly to us, and which a year from today may be forever silent.

I. The Voice Which Calls for Reformation

Your character can be amended and improved, but not at just any time. There are favorable seasons. In the town of my boyhood I delighted to watch on a winter’s night the streams of molten metal writhing and twisting like lost spirits as they poured from the furnaces of the wire mill. Before the furnace doors stood men in leathern aprons, with iron tongs in their hands, ready to seize the fiery coils and direct them to the molds. But if the iron was permitted to cool below a certain temperature, it refused the mold. There are times when life’s metal is, as it were, molten, and can be worked into any design that is desired. But if it is permitted to cool, it tends toward a state of fixation, in which it is possible neither to do nor even to plan a good work. When the angel came down to trouble the pool at Jerusalem, then was the time for the sick to step in and be healed. There are moments when the pool of life is troubled by the angel of opportunity. Then a man, if he will, can go down and be made whole; but if he waits until the waters are still, it is too late.

A man who had been under the bondage of an evil habit relates how one night, sitting in his room in a hotel, he was assailed by his old enemy, his besetting sin, and was about to yield to it. He was reaching out his hand to ring the bell for a waiter, when suddenly, as if an angel stood before him, a voice seemed to say, “This is your hour. If you yield to this temptation now, it will destroy you. If you conquer it now, you are its master forever.” He obeyed the angel’s voice, refused the tempter and came off victorious over his enemy.

That man was not unique in his experience, for to many a man there comes the hour when destiny knocks at his door and the angel waits to see whether he will obey him or reject him. These are precious and critical moments in the history of the soul. In your life there may be that which you know to be wrong and sinful. In his mercy God has awakened conscience, or has flooded your heart with a sudden wave of contrition and sorrow. This is the hour of opportunity, for now chains of evil habit can be broken, which, if not broken, will bind us forever. Now golden goals can be chosen and decisions made which shall affect our destiny forever.

We like to quote those fine lines from the pen of the late Senator John J. Ingalls:

Master of human destinies am I!
Fame, love, and fortune on my footsteps wait.
Cities and fields I walk; I penetrate
Deserts and fields remote, and, passing by
Hovel and mart and palace, soon or late,
I knock unbidden once at every gate!
If sleeping, wake; if feasting, rise before
I turn away. It is the hour of fate,
And they who follow me reach every state
Mortals desire, and conquer every foe
Save death; but those who doubt or hesitate,

Condemned to failure, penury or woe,
Seek me in vain and uselessly implore —
I answer not, and I return no more.

We all recognize the truth of this in the things of this world, but in a far more solemn way it is true of the opportunities of our spiritual life. You can build a bonfire any time you please; but the fine fire of the Spirit, that is a different thing. God has his Moment!

We cannot kindle when we will

The fire that in the heart resides.

The Spirit bloweth and is still;

In mystery the soul abides.

II. The Voice of Friendship and Affection

Suppose that Timothy, when he received that letter from Paul asking him to come before winter, had said to himself: "Yes, I shall start for Rome; but first of all I must clear up some matters here at Ephesus, and then go down to Miletus to ordain elders there, and thence over to Colossae to celebrate the Communion there." When he has attended to these matters, he starts for Troas, and there inquires when he can get a ship which will carry him across to Macedonia, and thence to Italy, or one that is sailing around Greece into the Mediterranean. He is told that the season for navigation is over and that no vessels will sail till springtime. "No ships for Italy till April!"

All through that anxious winter we can imagine Timothy reproaching himself that he did not go at once when he received Paul's letter, and wondering how it fares with the Apostle. When the first vessel sails in the springtime, Timothy is a passenger on it. I can see him landing at Neapolis, or Brundisium, and hurrying up to Rome. There he seeks out Paul's prison, only to be cursed and repulsed by the guard. Then he goes to the house of Claudia, or Pudens, or Narcissus, or Mary, or Ampliatus, and asks where he can find Paul. I can hear them say: "And are you Timothy? Don't you know that Paul was beheaded last December? Every time the jailer put the key in the door of his cell, Paul thought you were coming. His last message was for you, 'Give my love to Timothy, my beloved son in the faith, when he comes.'" How Timothy then must have wished that he had come before winter!

Before winter or never! "The poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always," said Jesus when the disciples complained that Mary's costly and beautiful gift of ointment might have been expended in behalf of the poor. "Me ye have not always." That is true of all the friends we love. We cannot name them now, but next winter we shall know their names. With them, as far as our ministry is concerned, it is before winter or never.

In the Old Abbey Kirk at Haddington one can read over the grave of Jane Welsh the first of many pathetic and regretful tributes paid by Thomas Carlyle to his neglected wife: "For forty years she was a true and loving helpmate of her husband, and by act and word worthily forwarded him as none else could in all worthy he did or attempted. She died at London the 21st of April, 1866, suddenly snatched from him, and the light of his life as if gone out." It has been said that the saddest sentence in English literature is that sentence written by Carlyle in his diary, "Oh, that I had you yet for five minutes by my side, that I might tell you all." Hear, then, careless soul, who art dealing with loved ones as if thou wouldst have them always with thee, these solemn words of warning from Carlyle: "Cherish what is dearest while you have it near you, and wait not till it is far away. Blind and deaf that we are, O think, if thou yet love anybody living, wait not till death sweep down the paltry little dust clouds and dissonances of the moment, and all be made at last so mournfully clear and beautiful, when it is too late."

On one of the early occasions when I preached on this text in Philadelphia, there was present at the service a student in the Jefferson Medical College (Dr. Arnot Walker, New Galilee, Pennsylvania). When the service was over he went back to his room on Arch Street, where the text kept repeating itself in his mind, "Come before winter." "Perhaps," he thought to himself, "I had better write a letter to my mother." He sat down and wrote a letter such as a mother delights to receive from her son. He took the letter down the street, dropped it in a mailbox, and returned to his room. The next day in the midst of his studies a telegram was placed in his hand. Tearing it open, he read these words: "Come home at once. Your mother is dying." He took the train that night for Pittsburgh, and then another train to the town near the farm where his home was. Arriving at the town, he was driven to the farm and, hurrying up the stairs, found his mother still living, with a smile of recognition and satisfaction on her face — the smile which, if a man has once seen, he can never forget.

Under her pillow was the letter he had written her after the Sunday night service, her viaticum and heartease as she went down into the River. The next time he met me in Philadelphia he said, "I am glad you preached that sermon, 'Come Before Winter.'" Not a few have been glad because this sermon was preached. Let us pray that the preaching of it tonight shall move others to do that which

shall make their hearts glad in the years to come.

Twice coming to the sleeping disciples whom he had asked to watch with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ awakened them and said with sad surprise, "What, could ye not watch with me one hour?" When he came the third time and found them sleeping, he looked sadly down upon them and said, "Sleep on now, and take your rest." One of those three, James, was the first of the twelve apostles to die for Christ and seal his faith with his heart's blood. Another, John, was to suffer imprisonment for the sake of Christ on the isle that is called Patmos. And Peter was to be crucified for his sake. But never again could those three sleeping disciples ever watch with Jesus in his hour of agony. That opportunity was gone forever! You say, when you hear that a friend has gone, "Why, it cannot be possible! I saw him only yesterday on the corner of Smithfield and Sixth Avenue!" Yes, you saw him there yesterday, but you will never see him there again. You say you intended to do this thing, to speak this word of appreciation or amendment, or show this act of kindness; but now the vacant chair, the unlifted book, the empty place will speak to you with a reproach which your heart can hardly endure, "Sleep on now, and take your rest! Sleep! Sleep! Sleep forever!"

III. The Voice of Christ

More eager, more wistful, more tender than any other voice is the voice of Christ which now I hear calling men to come to him, and to come before winter. I wish I had been there when Christ called his disciples, Andrew and Peter, and James and John, by the Sea of Galilee, or Matthew as he was sitting at the receipt of custom. There must have been a note not only of love and authority but of immediacy and urgency in his voice, for we read that they "left all and followed him."

The greatest subject which can engage the mind and attention of man is eternal life. Hence the Holy Spirit, when he invites men to come to Christ, never says "Tomorrow" but always "Today." If you can find me one place in the Bible where the Holy Spirit says, "Believe in Christ tomorrow," or "Repent and be saved tomorrow," I will come down out of the pulpit and stay out of it — for I would have no Gospel to preach. But the Spirit always says, "Today," never "Tomorrow." "Now is the accepted time." "Now is the day of salvation." "Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." "While it is called Today."

The reason for this urgency is twofold. First, the uncertainty of human life. A long time ago, David, in his last interview with Jonathan, said, "As thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me and death." That is true of every one of us. But a step! What shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue!

An old rabbi used to say to his people, *'Repent the day before you die.'*

"But," they said to him, *"Rabbi, we know not the day of our death"*

"Then," he answered, *"repent today."*

Come before winter!

The second reason why Christ, when he calls a man, always says "**Today, and never Tomorrow**", is that tomorrow the disposition of a man's heart may have changed. There is a time to plant, and a time to reap. The heart, like the soil, has its favorable seasons. "Speak to my brother now! His heart is tender now!" a man once said to me concerning his brother, who was not a believer. Today a man may hear this sermon and be interested, impressed, almost persuaded, ready to take his stand for Christ and enter into eternal life. But he postpones his decision and says, "Not tonight, but tomorrow." A week hence, a month hence, a year hence, he may come back and hear the same call to repentance and to faith. But it has absolutely no effect upon him, for his heart is as cold as marble and the preacher might as well preach to a stone or scatter seed on the marble pavement below this pulpit. Oh, if the story of this one church could be told, if the stone should cry out of the wall and the beam out of the timber should answer, what a story they could tell of those who once were almost persuaded but who now are far from the Kingdom of God. Christ said, Today! They answered, Tomorrow!

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death.

Once again, then, I repeat these words of the Apostle, "Come before winter"; and as I pronounce them, common sense, experience, conscience, Scripture, the Holy Spirit, the souls of just men made perfect, and the Lord Jesus Christ all repeat with me, "Come before winter!" Come before the haze of Indian summer has faded from the fields! Come before the November wind strips the leaves from the trees and sends them whirling over the fields! Come before the snow lies on the uplands and the meadow brook is turned to ice! Come before the heart is cold! Come before desire has failed! Come before life is over and your probation ended, and you stand before God to give an account of the use you have made of the opportunities which in his grace he has granted to you! Come before winter!

Come to thy God in time,

Youth, manhood, old age past;

Come to thy God at last.