



A LETTER FROM YOUR PASTOR: MARCH 2024

by Lee Shipp

AND THEN THEY WERE GONE

"... Demas has forsaken me" (2 Timothy 4:10).

I know this pain. Imagine Paul waking up only to find Demas gone. I was counting on him. He said he would be there, but he's gone. I am alone. I needed him. Why? What happened?

It hurts to be rejected. It is a gnawing pain like no other. I know it too well. What's worse is when you are rejected for no reason; no explanation is given... they just left... you!

2 Timothy 3 describes this generation of believers as those who forsake. A generation that does not keep their word. A generation that is focused on self-pleasure. They are always looking for selfish fulfillment and delight. When they are bored, they are gone. When it is no longer fun here, they will leave and find another place. If you hurt their feelings or get cross with them, they disappear! Oh, that there was authentic love. True friendship. Loyalty. The feeling of being forsaken is a blow to the heart that no physician can heal.

I have watched them walk out. The pain is overwhelming. You did life together. You loved each other... and then they were gone! Without even saying a word. If they just would have said something. Even if they would have said, "I hate you. I cannot stand the sight of you. When I see you, my skin crawls." That would be better than the silent exit.

People who forsake and walk out of your life are weak. They are embarrassed and full of shame. They are unfaithful, not only to you,

but to God. A friend once told me, "Look where they go when they leave. That will tell you what is in their heart." True. In Paul's case, Demas left for the world.

Please let me be clear. People can leave churches and be in the will of God. Often, God may call a family to the ministry, which demands that they relocate to another church - that is not running; that is life. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit may require one to sever a relationship to bring redemption. The Holy Spirit leads in these situations, and the direction will be biblical and healthy.

THE DECEPTION OF RUNNING

Those who quit, those who forsake, those who run find little strength in Jesus. They have little time for those who want to follow Jesus. They like church. They like their quick little religious rituals. But it is all rooted in how it serves "self."

They think they are so close to the Lord. They think they are so grounded in the faith. They know all the answers. But the problem is they do not realize they are naked, blind, and poor. Contented with their forms of godliness, they have fallen short of coming to the knowledge of the truth. Believing they are themselves capable of ministry: helping the hurting, fighting spiritual warfare successfully, and comforting those in distress, they are too blind to see that they need their psychotherapist!

They left Jesus. When He had to rebuke them, they left. They ran away when it was no longer food, fun, and fellowship. When Jesus started talking about commitment, they bolted. He wasn't even sure of His own company. He had to ask His closest friends, the apostles, if they would leave too.

I love Peter's answer. "Where would we go?" I love this. There is truth here. If you have somewhere else to go, you will. For Peter, there was no other option; Jesus was it! People leave you because they can. They can because they have options. They have options because the Holy Spirit does not lead them.

I HAVE FAILED AS A MINISTER

I would imagine Paul struggled at the end of his life. There he was: forsaken by Demas, left alone in the dungeon, waiting for his execution in the spring. This had to weigh heavily on his mind. At one point, he was harassed by Alexander, and not one person in the church came to help him. Paul got his strength from the Lord, who came and ministered to him. Imagine coming to the end of your ministry and no one in the church wants to be associated with you. We celebrate Paul today, but they hated him in his day.

He confessed his pain to the Corinthians. They broke his heart. He said that the more he loved them, the more they hated him. Pastors are acquainted with this pain—this rejection. But we continue to love because of the love of Christ inside of us.

I feel like such a failure as a minister. Every time someone has chosen to leave, I would suffer such condemnation. I would cry to God to remove me from my post. It all seems so personal. As Paul confessed, Demas forsook ME! Paul said it was personal; Demas forsook ME, not Jesus. This is painful for ministers. We want to be good shepherds. We want to serve the Lord well. We want to do a good job. And then the sheep leave you. Oh, what a blow.

People walk out of your life for no reason, without even saying a word: people you loved, you served, you prayed for, you spent nights without sleep interceding for. Oh, the pain. You ask yourself, as a minister, "What am I doing wrong? God, why do you not release me? I am no good to you!" And then Jesus answers: You do not rejoice in your success for Me. Do not rejoice in what you can do for Me. Rejoice rather in what I have done for you. I did something so your name could be written in heaven.

OUR WITNESS TO THE WORLD

So, here is my request. Can we live differently? Can we be the people of grace? Can we be the church that does not quit or pursue self-pleasure? Can we be the church that can take criticism? Can we be the kind of friend that works through offenses? Can we be mature enough to resolve our disagreements without destroying our friendship? Can we show the world the love of God by loving one another instead of running away? Can we stick it out? Can we weather the season? Can we bear some hard times?

Stop running. Stop quitting. Stop seeking your own pleasure. Love to the end ... and then some more! Put up with some pain. Let somebody disagree with you, rebuke you, even offend you. Then, grow from it; don't run from it. Become more Christ-like. Suffer well.

These are temporary situations. Seasons that will change. Life will get better. Your friends will still be your friends ... if you don't quit. You will make up, and life will go on. But don't destroy your life, friends, or family because of a season of hardness. You stood at their wedding; you went on vacations together and were a guest in their home. You spent a lifetime developing these friendships; don't lose them over a moment of pain and offense. But the ease by which people walk out of each other's lives, marriages, and friendships – only reveals the ease by which they disregard God.

Be the friend that sticks closer than a brother. Love to the very end. Love with the love that endures all things. Love with the love that weathers the seasons. Then you shall have joy and happiness.