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Deserted Yet Forgiving

"At my first defence no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!."

– 2 Timothy 4:16

Summary:

Paul stood alone before Nero's tribunal when every friend deserted him, yet he responded with prayer rather than resentment. His experience reminds believers that abandonment in adversity is painful but not unusual. It also reveals the frailty of good people: sincere Christians may fail through fear without becoming apostates. Paul therefore distinguished weakness from hardened opposition. Above all, he displayed the forgiving spirit of Stephen and Christ, refusing to magnify the offence and praying that it would not be charged against those who had failed him.

Outline:

1. **Paul stood alone in a dangerous hour**
   - His friends failed to support him when he appeared before Nero's tribunal.
2. **Desertion in adversity is not unusual**
   - Human friendship often weakens when prosperity gives way to trouble.
3. **Even good people may fail through fear**
   - Believers remain human, and sincere faith does not remove every weakness.
4. **Weakness differs from hardened apostasy**
   - Paul distinguished temporary defection from deliberate persecution and blasphemy.
5. **Forgiveness overcomes the injury**
   - Like Stephen and Christ, believers should pray for offenders and overcome evil with good.

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Text

This was a very trying case. He was a prisoner who had appealed to Cæsar. He had to appear before Nero's tribunal—the greatest and most cruel monarch on earth—to defend himself against a charge that had led him to suffer as an evildoer, even to the point of being bound. His friends should have rallied around him: encouraging him with their kindness, emboldening him with their presence, clearing him through their testimony, or softening his judges with their tears and entreaties.

It was customary among the Romans for the accused to be accompanied in court by their relations, dressed in mourning to show their concern for the prisoner and sway the tribunal through their testimony or appeals. Sometimes the group accompanying them was very large and imposing. But on the day of his trial, Paul appeared like an outcast, utterly disowned. Looking around, he saw no one on his side; he was completely abandoned—no one stood by him, and everyone forsook him.

Yet this gives the Apostle an opportunity to show the excellence of his principles and character: "I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge." From this, we may observe,

- **First, people are often deserted in times of trial.**

The rich have many friends, but the poor plead in vain. Some act as if brothers were meant for prosperity, not adversity. Some Christians are like a gardener: he tends his garden when it blooms with flowers and fruit, but neglects it in the cold, dark days of winter.

Are you suffering such desertion? Others have endured it: David, in deep distress, learned that Ahithophel had joined Absalom's conspirators. Job lamented, "My brethren have dealt deceitfully as a brook, and as the stream of brooks they pass away; which are blackish by reason of the ice, and wherein the snow is hid: what time they wax warm, they vanish; when it is hot, they are consumed out of their place." Is Scripture alone continually telling us, "Cease from man?"

- **Secondly, see the frailty of good men.**

These people had merely faltered through weakness, unlike the hardened persecutor and blasphemer Paul describes in the preceding verse: "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: of whom beware thou also; for he hath greatly withstood our words."

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People may backslide without becoming apostates; they may act weakly, not wickedly, without defying the Spirit of grace.

Thus these people were friends at heart; their defection was temporary, and they would soon regret it. Yet even the best remain human: holiness does not erase human nature. How painfully and humbly they can change! Who would have thought Elijah, after confronting Ahab's abominations and killing the false prophets, would flee Jezebel's threat and pray for death? Or that Peter, who drew his sword before Roman soldiers and struck the High Priest's servant, would hours later deny Jesus with oaths and curses when questioned by a servant girl?

When these brethren heard Paul was coming to appeal, they went to meet him at Appii-Forum and the Three Taverns. Seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. Yet, fearing for their own safety and remembering how many had recently suffered, they gave in to apprehension; not one fulfilled the hope they had inspired. Lord, what is man!

- **Thirdly, how becoming and lovely is a forgiving disposition!**

However leniently we judge those who forsook Paul, they were blameworthy. Their desertion was especially painful given their duty to a man suffering for their professed cause and their claims of friendship. Betrayal in a time of need wounds deeply, yet Paul's bleeding heart says only, "I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge." Follow his example: in disputes, consider what excuses others rather than what worsens their fault. Be tenderhearted and forgiving, as God forgave you through Christ. "It is the glory of a man to pass by a transgression."

The noblest victory is overcoming evil with good. As stones rained down on Stephen, he cried, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." As Jesus was nailed to the cross, he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, Morning and Evening Exercises (February 1, Evening), first published in 1854.