

August 21, 1983
Philippians 4:10-20

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"THE POWER TO SEE THINGS THROUGH"

TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 4:13--"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

One of the more intriguing, but enigmatic, characters in the New Testament is a little-known man by the name of Demas. If you have never heard of him, you needn't be surprised. For he is mentioned only three times, and then only in passing. In Paul's brief but intensely personal letter to Philemon, he writes of "Demas and Luke, my fellow workers." Here Demas, along with Luke, and named before him at that, is seen standing by Paul in his imprisonment, a devoted and promising disciple. Then, in the letter to the Colossians, we find "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you." And finally, in the second letter to Timothy, we read these sad words, "Demas forsook me, having loved this present age." As Harry Emerson Fosdick pointed out in a sermon on this theme, these three brief passages constitute three positions on a graph that enable us to plot its curve. Here is the story of a man who, though he began well, ended in failure. Demas my fellow-worker; Demas; and Demas forsook me.

As a matter of fact, however, this is the story of not just one man, but three: Paul, Luke and Demas. When we first meet them, all three were fired with enthusiasm and filled with sufficient strength of purpose and character to stand up to the power and authority of the greatest empire the world has ever known. But somewhere along the way events and the terrible pressures generated by them, became too much for Demas. In spite of his good intentions, in spite of his strong beginnings, Demas caved in, "having loved this present age." We can only guess at the details of this tragic story, but let us not impoverish it by any facile casting of blame. It would be far too easy, and utterly unrealistic, just to accuse Demas of cowardice. Too easy because it would not really explain anything, and unrealistic because it would not account for his heroism in standing by Paul during the early days of his imprisonment. And most important of all, to suppose that Demas differed from Paul and Luke primarily through some inherent fault of character would leave unanswered the one question of real significance for our own spiritual struggle, "What was it that Paul and Luke had which gave to them but not to Demas the power to see things through?"

After all, we're not really interested in Demas. His importance to us is not in and of himself but as a symbol of something many of us can easily recognize within ourselves. We, too, are people who make a good beginning. And sometimes we are able to carry our initial success on through. But sometimes we, too, set out upon a commitment, following a vision of what might be only to discover, like Demas, that the struggle is more difficult than we supposed and our own resources somehow unequal to the task. Then the important question is "What now?" How can we be a Paul or a Luke instead of a Demas? Where can we find the power to see things through?

The answer, it seems to me, is best found in this morning's Scripture Lesson, specifically in Philippians 4:13: "I have strength enough for anything through Him who shares his strength with me."

Now some of you may be saying, "Wait just a minute, my Bible doesn't say that!" And you are probably right. Both the King James and the Revised Standard translations say, "I can do all things through him (or through Christ) who strengthens me." But I have retranslated this great text for two reasons. First, because the older versions are so often abused and secondly, because they're just not accurate.

Admittedly, the old translations are comforting. One reason why Norman Vincent Peale has been so popular over the years is that in stressing this particular verse, mistranslation and all, he has told people what they have wanted to hear. He has promised them a way out of their troubles--a way to change the world and their lives to make things more palatable.

According to Dr. Peale, most failures are caused by lack of faith. Therefore, a strengthened faith can turn failure into success, and he urges us to strengthen our faith by repeating over and over again, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." He even gives examples of folk who have done just that: a student who did it and got better grades; an athlete who did it and won the big game; a salesman who did it and sold a big insurance policy.

But popular or not, this philosophy bothers me. For one thing, it is not religion. It's magic. Religion is a system for bending man's will to God's purposes, while magic seeks to use God's power for man's purposes. And what a world of difference there is between them. But more than that, Pealeism, if I may call it that, promises something it often can't deliver.

It encourages us to believe that we can do anything, anything at all, if we just have faith. And even a brief consideration reminds us that that's not true. Some things, for instance, are simply not possible. Try as I might I cannot fly like a bird, or bear children like a woman, or grow younger instead of older. And, even within the realm of possibility, not all things are possible to me. I have played games and lost. I have sought jobs and not gotten them. I prayed for my father's life, and he died. No doubt, confidence helps me to do my best, but sometimes my best isn't good enough.

Then, when life seems to have me beaten, when my need is not so much to succeed as simply to survive, then I need to hear what this passage is really saying. Not, "I can do anything", but, "I can handle anything through Him who strengthens me." And this is the way you will find it stated in most of the modern translations. "With God's help I can always manage."

See how this turns the whole thing around. No longer is Paul seemingly saying that God will always help to change our outward circumstances. People may still lose their jobs; loved ones may still get sick and die; and we may still suffer disappointment, pain, and loss. God is not presented as some form of celestial errand boy to correct all our mistakes and serve our every whim. But Paul does promise that God will help to change us. That whether we win or whether we lose, whether we have too

much or too little, we can have strength enough for anything through God who shares his strength with us. With God's help, we can always manage.

And, I'm suggesting that perhaps this was the difference between Demas on the one hand and Paul and Luke on the other. All three started out with high hopes. All three had faith in God. But Demas' faith required God to change circumstances--to open the prison doors and set Paul free. And when that didn't happen, when Paul's death became more and more certain, Demas couldn't take it. But Paul and Luke had a different, more realistic kind of faith--not just the hope that things would change, but the power to see things through. "I have strength enough for anything through Him who shares His strength with me." The Good News is that we don't have to find the power within ourselves to meet all of life's problems. God has enough strength for all of us and offers to share with us if we will only let Him. But that sharing is an ongoing process. It's not something one can do once and then forget about it. The power to see things through is rather like the power in my rechargeable razor. When it's fully charged, I can leave the power source and go all over the house shaving wherever I will. But the charge only lasts for a few shaves. Then it begins to run down. And most of the time, I don't know the charge is getting low until I try to use it. Now, faith is like that. It will do wonderful things, but it needs to be recharged from time to time. And often we don't know it's getting low until we have to use it. Surely the wise thing is to recharge it regularly so as to keep it strong and able to see us through both good times and bad, each of which involves its own particular temptations.

That's why it pains me to look out and see this nave half full on Sunday morning. Not because people are letting me down, but because they're letting themselves down. And I wonder what demands will be made on their faith this week. Without this Sunday's charge, will there be enough power to see them through? I hope so, but I would be more confident if they were here.