

Xi. the Offer

by Martyrs of the Catacombs

Marcellus visits Lucullus to ask for his assistance in saving a young boy who is being held as a prisoner, and offers to give his own life in exchange for the boy's freedom.

Scripture: John 15:13, Romans 5:8, Romans 8:38, Philippians 4:7, 1 John 3:16

Topics: "Sacrificial Love", "Christian Martyrdom"

Description

The preacher Martyrs of the Catacombs shares a powerful story of sacrificial love and selflessness, where Marcellus offers his own life in exchange for a young boy's freedom, highlighting the depth of love that surpasses all understanding and the willingness to lay down one's life for a friend. Despite facing persecution and imminent death, Marcellus finds peace and strength in his faith, demonstrating unwavering courage and devotion to his Christian beliefs. Through Marcellus' ultimate sacrifice, the sermon explores the profound impact of love, friendship, and the eternal hope found in Christ even in the face of adversity and death.

Transcript

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

It was evening in the Pretorian camp. Lucullus was in his room seated by a lamp which threw a bright light around. He was roused by a knock at the door. At once rising, he opened it. A man entered and advanced silently to the middle of the room. He then disencumbered himself of the folds of a large mantle in which he was dressed and faced Lucullus.

"Marcellus!" cried the other in amazement, and springing forward he embraced his visitor with every mark of joy.

"Dear friend," said he, "to what happy chance do I owe this meeting? I was just thinking of you and wondering when we should meet again."

"Our meetings, I fear," said Marcellus sadly "will not be very frequent now. I make this one at the risk of my life."

"True," said Lucullus, participating in the sadness of the other. "You are pursued, and there is a price on your head. Yet here you are as safe as you ever were in those happy days before this madness seized you. O, Marcellus why can they not return again?"

"I cannot change my nature nor undo what is done. Moreover, Lucullus, although my lot may appear to you a hard one, I never was so happy."

"Happy!" cried the other in deep surprise.

"Yes, Lucullus, though afflicted I am not cast down; though persecuted I am not in despair."

"The persecution of the emperor is no slight matter."

"I know it well. I see my brethren fall before it every day. Every day the circle that surrounds me is lessened. Friends leave me and never appear again. Companions go up to the city, but when they return they are carried back dead to be deposited in their graves."

"And yet you say you can be happy?"

"Yes, Lucullus, I have a peace that the world knows nothing of; a peace that cometh from above, that passeth all understanding."

"I know, Marcellus, that you are too brave to fear death; but I never knew that you had sufficient fortitude to endure calmly all that I know you must now suffer. Your courage is superhuman, or rather it is the courage of madness."

"It comes from above, Lucullus. Once I was incapable of feeling it, but now old things have passed away and all has become new. Sustained by this new power, I can endure the utmost evils that can be dealt upon me. I expect nothing but suffering in life, and know that I shall die in agony; yet the thought can not overcome the strong faith that is within me."

"It pains me," said Lucullus sadly, "to see you so determined. If I saw the slightest sign of wavering in you I would hope that time might change or modify your feelings. But you seem to me to be fixed unalterably in your new course."

"God grant that I may remain steadfast unto the end!" said Marcellus fervently. "But it is not of my feelings that I came to speak. I come, Lucullus, to ask your assistance, to claim your sympathy and help. You promised me once to show me your friendship if I needed it. I come now to claim it."

"All that is in my power is yours already, Marcellus. Tell what you want."

"You have a prisoner."

"Yes, many."

"This is a boy."

"I believe my men captured a boy a short time since."

"This boy is too insignificant to merit capture. He is beneath the wrath of the emperor. He is yet in your power. I come, Lucullus, to implore his delivery."

"Alas, Marcellus, what is it that you ask? Have you forgotten the discipline of the Roman army, or the military oath? Do you not know that if I did this I would violate that oath and make myself a traitor? If you asked me to fall upon my sword I would do it more readily than this."

"I have not forgotten the military oath or the discipline of the camp, Lucullus. I thought that this lad, being scarcely more than a child, might not be considered a prisoner. Do the commands of the emperor extend to children?"

"He makes no distinction of age. Have you not seen children as young as this lad suffer death in the Coliseum?"

"Alas I have," said Marcellus, as his thoughts reverted to those young girls whose death-song once struck so painfully and so sweetly upon his heart. "This young boy, then, must also suffer?"

"Yes," said Lucullus, "unless he abjures Christianity."

"And that he will never do."

"Then he will rush upon his fate. The law does this, not I, Marcellus. I am but the instrument. Do not blame me."

"I do not blame you. I know well how strongly you are bound to obedience. If you hold your office you must perform its duties. Yet let me make another proposal. Surrender of prisoners is not allowed, but an exchange is lawful."

"Yes."

"If I could tell you of a prisoner far more important than this boy, you would exchange, would you not?"

"But you have taken none of us prisoners?"

"No, but we have power over our own people. And there are some among us on whose heads the emperor has placed a large reward. For the capture of these a hundred lads like this boy would be gladly given."

"Is it then a custom among Christians to betray one another?" asked Lucullus in surprise.

"No, but sometimes one Christian will offer his own life to save that of another."

"Impossible!"

"It is so in this instance."

"Who is it that is offered for this boy?"

"I Marcellus!"

At this astounding declaration Lucullus started back.

"You!" he cried.

"Yes, I myself."

"You are jesting. It is impossible."

"I am serious. It is for this that I have already exposed my life in coming to you. I have shown the interest that I take in him by this great risk. I will explain.

"This boy Pollio is the last of an ancient and noble Roman family. He is the only son of his mother. His father died in battle. He belongs to the Servilii."

"The Servilii! Is his mother the Lady Caecilia?"

"Yes. She is a refugee in the Catacombs. Her whole life and love is wrapped up in this boy. Every day she lets him go up into the city, a dangerous adventure, and in his absence she suffers indescribable agony. Yet she is afraid to keep him there always for fear that the damp air which is so fatal to children may cut him off. So she exposes him to what she thinks is a smaller danger.

"This boy you have a prisoner. That mother has heard of it, and now lies hovering between life and death. If you destroy him she too will die, and one of the noblest and purest spirits in Rome will be no more.

"For these reasons I come to offer myself in exchange. What am I? I am alone in the world. No life is wrapped up in mine. No one depends on me for the present and the future. I fear not death. It may as well come now as at any other time. It must come sooner or later, and I would rather give my life as a ransom for a friend than lay it down uselessly.

"For these reasons, Lucullus, I implore you, by the sacred ties of friendship, by your pity, by your promise to me, give me your assistance now and take my life in exchange for him."

Lucullus rose to his feet and paced the room in great agitation.

"Why, O Marcellus," he cried at last, "do you try me so terribly?"

"My proposal is easy to receive."

"You forget that your life is precious to me."

"But think of this young lad."

"I pity him deeply. But do you think I can receive your life as a forfeit?"

"It is forfeited already, and will be surrendered sooner or later. I pray you let it be yielded up while it may be of service."

"You shall not die as long as I can prevent it. Your life is not yet forfeited. By the immortal gods, it will be long before you take your place in the arena."

"No one can save me when once I am taken. You might try your utmost. What could you do to save one on whom the emperor's wrath is falling?"

"I might do much to avert it. You do not know what might be done. But even if I could do nothing, still I would not listen to this proposal now."

"If I went to the emperor himself he would grant my prayer."

"He would take you prisoner at once and put both of you to death."

"I could send a messenger with my proposal."

"The message would never reach him; or at least not until it would be too late."

"There is then no hope?" said Marcellus mournfully.

"None."

"And you absolutely refuse to grant my request?"

"Alas, Marcellus, how can I be guilty of the death of my friend? You have no mercy on me. Forgive me if I refuse so unreasonable a proposal."

"The will of the Lord be done," said Marcellus. "I must hasten back. Alas! how can I carry with me this message of despair?"

The two friends embraced in silence, and Marcellus departed, leaving Lucullus overcome with amazement at this proposal.

Marcellus returned to the Catacombs in safety. The brethren there who knew of his errand received him again with mournful joy. The lady Caecilia still lay in a kind of stupor, only half conscious of surrounding events. At times her mind would wander, and in her delirium she would talk of happy scenes in her early life.

But the life which she had led in the Catacombs, the alternating hope and fear, joy and sorrow, the ever present anxiety, and the oppressive air of the place itself, had overcome both mind and body. Her delicate nature sank beneath the fury of such an ordeal, and this last heavy blow completed her prostration. She could not rally from its effects.

That night they watched around her couch. Every hour she grew feebler, and life was slowly but surely passing away. From that descent unto death not even the restoration of her son could have saved her.

But though earthly thoughts had left her and earthly feelings had grown faint, the one master passion of her later years held undiminished power over her. Her lips murmured still the sacred words which had so long been her support and consolation. The name of her darling boy was breathed from her lips though his present danger was forgotten; but it was the blessed name of Jesus that was uttered with the deepest fervor.

At length the end came. Starting from a long period of stillness, her eyes opened wide, a flush passed over her wan and emaciated face and she uttered a faint cry, "Come, Lord Jesus!" With the cry life went out, and the pure spirit of the lady Caecilia had returned unto God who gave it.

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