

# Damon and Pythias

John 15:9-17 | May 6, 2018

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Many Greeks who heard or read these words during the early years of the church might have remembered the legend I am about to share with you.

## THE STORY OF DAMON AND PYTHIAS

There lived in those days in Syracuse two young men called Damon and Pythias. They were very good friends and loved each other so dearly that they were hardly ever seen apart. They were both students of the philosopher Pythagoras. One of the maxims of the Pythagoreans was “Among friends, all things in common.” Maybe even life itself.

Pythias was accused of plotting against the tyrant, Dionysius of Syracuse, who put him in prison and condemned him to die. Another version says that it was a test planned out by Dionysius and his courtiers. The Pythagoreans were known for their moral courage. Some believed that they were fakes, while others disagreed. The plan was devised to test the Pythagoreans' moral courage in a time of crisis.

When Damon heard of it, he was in despair, and vainly tried to obtain his friend's pardon and release. The mother of Pythias was very old and lived in Athens, far away from Syracuse with her daughter. When the young man heard that he was to die, he was tormented by the thought of leaving the women alone. In an interview with his friend Damon, Pythias regretfully said that he would die easier if he were only able to bid his mother good-bye and find a protector for his sister.

Damon again approached the tyrant and begged for his friend. Dionysius, believing that once released, Pythias would flee and never return, refused. Damon, anxious to gratify his friend's last wish, proposed to take the place of Pythias in prison, and even to be executed, if need be, provided the latter were allowed to visit his relatives once more.

Dionysius had heard of the young men's touching friendship and he allowed them to change places, warning them both however, that, if Pythias were not back in time, Damon would have to die in his stead. At first Pythias refused to allow his friend to take his place in prison, but finally he consented, promising to be back in time to release him. So, Pythias hastened home to Athens, found a husband for his sister, and saw her happily married. Then after providing for his mother and bidding her farewell, he set out to return to Syracuse.

While returning from Athens by sea, pirates captured his ship on the passage back to Syracuse and threw him overboard. He swam to shore and began to make his way back to Syracuse as quickly as possible.

He was now traveling alone and on foot. He soon fell into the hands of thieves, who robbed him of his few belongings and bound him fast to a tree. It was only after hours of desperate struggling that he managed to wrench himself free once more and sped along his way.

He was running as hard as he could to make up for lost time, when he came to the edge of a stream. He had crossed it easily before; but a sudden spring freshet had changed it into a raging torrent, which no one else would have ventured to enter.

In spite of the danger, Pythias plunged into the water, and, nerved by the fear that his friend would die in his stead, he fought the current so successfully that he reached the other side, safe but almost exhausted.

Regardless of his pains, Pythias pressed onward, although his road now lay across a plain, where the hot rays of the sun and the burning sands greatly increased his fatigue and faintness, and almost made him die of thirst. Still he sped onward, as fast as his trembling limbs could carry him. The sun was sinking fast, and he knew that his friend would die if he were not in Syracuse by sunset.

Dionysius, in the meantime, had been amusing himself by taunting Damon, constantly telling him that he was a fool to have risked his life for a friend, however dear. To anger him, he also insisted that Pythias was only too glad to escape death and would be very careful not to return in time, if at all.

Damon, who knew the goodness and affection of his friend, received these remarks with the scorn they deserved, and repeated again and again that he knew Pythias would never break his word, but would be back in time, unless hindered in some unforeseen way.

The final hour came. The guards led Damon to the place of execution, where he again asserted his faith in his friend, adding, however, that he sincerely hoped Pythias would come too late, so that he might die in his stead.

Just as the guards were about to execute Damon, Pythias dashed up, pale and disheveled, and flung his arms around his friend's neck with a sob of relief. In a few hurried, panting words, Pythias explained the cause of his delay, and, loosing his friend's bonds with his own hands, he bade the guards bind him instead.

Dionysius, who had come to see the execution, was so touched by this true friendship, that he let both young men go free, saying that he would not have believed such devotion possible had he not seen it with his own eyes. It was also said that Dionysius then sought to become their third friend, and kept them close to him for the rest of his life.

This friendship, which touched the tyrant's heart, has become proverbial. When men are devoted friends, they are often compared to Damon and Pythias, whose story has been a favorite with poets and playwrights.

So, what does this have to do with Jesus?

- 1) Jesus actually *did* what Damon was *willing* to do. No one showed up at the last minute to save him.
- 2) Jesus *actually died* for those he considered his friends, *including* those who were executing him.
- 3) Death was *not* the end for Jesus. His resurrection shows that the power of life and death is not in the hands of the "tyrant of Syracuse", but in the hands of the King of the Universe.

Anyone can turn life into death. Only God can transform death into life.

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) So let us love one another.

*Pastor Keith*