

"ALMOST TOO LATE BUT SAVED"

Luke 23:32

INTRODUCTION:

There is an unusual story about Governor George K. Nash. The chief executive of Ohio from 1900-1904. A man was arrested and charged with a serious crime. He was indicted, tried, found guilty, sentenced to be executed and punished for the crime. Many people felt the sentence was too severe - and they asked the Governor for clemency, on behalf of the condemned man. The Governor studied the case and came to the conclusion that he could not make a decision. Without first meeting the prisoner.

He traveled to the State Penitentiary and was taken to the man's cell on death row, the condemned man was not told that the Governor of the State was going to visit him. When he walked into his cell - the prisoner concluded that the stranger was a prison chaplain. Not being a religious man, and mistaking the Governor for a chaplain, the condemned man ordered the man to leave his cell. So in words, of obscenity and very vulgar, which offended the ear of the dignified and respectable individual. Without saying a word, the Governor left the cell and went back to the Capitol and put aside unsigned the plea for release. Which would have reduced the sentence. And no sooner had the Governor left death row, than a guard who had overheard the exchange that went on, asked the man. Don't you know who that was? And the prisoner replied, wasn't he the prison chaplain. The guard answered no - that was Governor George K. Nash. Who had been petitioned to sign a commuting of sentence in your behalf. The man was executed. He was almost saved - but he missed it. The man could have had some relief and release. And lived perhaps many years longer. But being almost saved was not enough.

In the Gospel of Luke, we have an introduction to a man who was almost lost.

But who was saved. At a very late hour. All of the writers who recorded this tell about Christ's death. And Luke reported that here was a man in the last minutes of life - who made one of the greatest discoveries. The discovery of God's forgiving grace. And Luke told much about this one man who was almost lost. Who was almost too late. But who was saved.

As we consider this, very simply, I want to put this down where we live tonight. Because there are probably some of you who are almost too late. And you could be saved - but some of you have waited, and waited, and you may be too late.

Now in the Scripture, we will discover just what took place.

As it has been pointed out by many who have studied this story - that there were three crosses here. There was a cross of rebellion, there was a cross of repentance, and a cross of redemption. And as you look upon those crosses - you see there was a cross of rebellion. A man like that man in prison. Jesus was right there with him. But because of his rebellion, on the cross even - he was lost. Because he would have nothing to do with Jesus. And then--there was also the cross of repentance. Because we have discovered through the years that many people have found a blessing in that. And a hymn writer has expressed it in these words. "The dying thief rejoiced to see, that fountain in his day. And there may I, though vile as he." And there may be you. And you. But there was repentance on that cross. And it changed all. And of course there was the cross of redemption. Upon which Jesus rested.

As we think about this man, he was the last man that Jesus saved before he returned

to Heaven.

Now the fact that Jesus saved such a man, at all - ought to give everyone of us much hope and much comfort. This man was a thief. He was a highway robber. He was a murderer. And yet Christ takes this man when he ascends to glory. Jesus did not seem to be ashamed of this man. And surely, every sinner should have the same knowledge that Jesus will accept you. All kinds of men and women are represented among the converts who came to Jesus as recorded in the Gospel. And almost all of them were converted suddenly. That is why, even while we talk to you this evening, you can be converted. You can change your way of living. Your life can be turned around. Even this hour. Right now.

In the Bible, many sudden conversions are recorded. In the book of Acts, 8,000 people were converted in two days. The record tells us. Now some people may say, now that seems rather quick work, doesn't it. Well, yes. However, if all Christians who are listening to me, would only consecrate themselves to the work of Christ - they could be the means of bringing a number of people to Christ before this week is over.

Now we are going to look at Christ hanging on the cross, between these two thieves and we are going to see the Scribes and the Pharisees - his enemies making fun of him. We are going to see that his Disciples have gone away. We are going to see only his mother and only one or two other women in sight, to cheer him on with their presence.

And here is the mocking of the enemies.

Let us take now this account and put it into two or three words. First, here is

the predicament. And then there is the plea. And thirdly, and finally, the promise -
V. 42-44.

I. PREDICAMENT - V. 33-39

In these verses, we will discover that the thief was in a real bad situation.
The Bible tells us that when they were coming to this place called Calvary, they
crucified him. And on his right hand and on his left hand, they also crucified two
male factors. And the Bible says, that they were crucified there - and when you read
the Scripture. The thief on the cross was coming to an end of a wasted life.

You often come across people about whom you would like to know more about. Or
that more were available for you. But this is one man that we know just a little
bit about. Very little is known about this man. We are not really sure about the
crimes that he committed.

Matthew and Mark referred to him and his companion in lawlessness simply as
robbers.

Luke calls these two men criminals.

John merely says that two others died with Jesus.

Now I believe that these two criminals were probably men who worked with Barabbas.
The man who at the last moment was set free by the Romans. And upon whose cross, the

Lord Jesus died. Now, I would like to know more about this fellow. Who at the last moment of life, turned to Christ, and made the greatest discovery in the world. The discovery of the forgiveness of grace.

Now whatever the facts about him were, doubtless his was a wasted life. A life that had been thrown away. His accomplishments for good and for God added up to nothing. He really had not worked for God.

He was about to die. And to do what good he points to show - as a result of his days, what person's life had been blessed because he had touched it? What service had he rendered? That would be lasting as a memorial to him after he was gone. Absolutely nothing. That is why we say, he was in an awful predicament. He was coming to the end of the road with nothing good to show for having walked this road. And having traveled this way. There are a great number of people who travel through life, and never have anything at the end of their way to show for their journey.

We might point out that a man does not have to do what this man did in order to know the predicament of a wasted life. He does not have to throw his life away in lawlessness or in crime. That may add up to nothing. There are many people who share the criminals predicament today. Life for them is just a day to day existence. It is filled with activities of going nowhere and becoming lost and not getting anywhere. Or of making any contribution or doing any good.

The poet said, there are a lot of men who creep into this world to eat and sleep. And know no reason why they are born. Save only to eat the corn. Devour the milk, bread, and fish. And leave behind an empty dish.

On their tombstones when they die, are not to tattle or to lie. There is nothing better to be said - but they have eaten up their bread, drank their drink, and gone to bed.

When you read about people in the Bible - it is very interesting. There was a man by the name of Methuselah. In just a few words, the Bible tells you all that took place in his life. Do you know what took place? 969 years - he was born. He begat children, and he died. And all of that took place in 969 years. He did nothing that could be spoken of in the way of achievement or service to others. Therefore, the Bible is simply one short brief sketch tells that.

Now this criminal is coming to the end of a wasted life. And that was a bad predicament.

Another thing about his predicament is this - he was dying a horrible death. His life of lawlessness and crime had been halted by arrest. He had been tried, and he had been sentenced, he had been jailed. And now he has been executed. And the means of execution was horrible beyond description. Those who have read the descriptions of what happened to a person being crucified, have found the reports sickening. It is the most horrible form of death. Without the slightest bit of mercy, a man was stripped of all human dignity, and many cases reduced to a raving maniac. Before his death ended in agony. Now this was the kind of death that he was experiencing as a result of his sins. And he knew that he was paying a terrific price for a wasted life.

Did you know the Bible teaches us that sinners will pay for their sins. That the universe is geared to work against the wrong-doer. Even though he often appears to

be operating on the fringe of the law. And walking all over other people in his desire to get ahead and be successful. What a person must remember is that payday does not always come in the manner or the moment that the deed is done. And there are ways in which men pay for their sins - which are not always outward or obvious. However, the fact remains that the sinner, in his misconduct, does something to himself and his sin always exact a great payment from him.

v. 39
The Pharisees called out to Jesus - if Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. And we will believe thee. And the account says that the two thieves cast the same words at Jesus. So then the first thing that we know of our man is that he was a reviler of Christ. You might think of him hanging there in the midst of torture, certain to be dead in a few hours, instead of confessing his sins or thinking about preparing to meet God whose laws he had broken in life. He is now abusing God's only son. Surely this man cannot sink lower until he sinks into Hell.

But in this predicament, the next thing that we discover is - that he appears to be under conviction. Nobody is ever converted until he is convicted. In this Scripture we have - and one of the male factors which were hanged, railed on him saying - if Thy be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other thief answered, rebuking him saying, doesth thou not fear God. Seeing thou art in the same condemnation. And we indeed justly for we receive the same rewards of our deeds. But this man has done nothing amiss.

What do you suppose it was that made this man change, in his feelings, in such a short time.

of the earth. And the business of death was going on as usual. And the crowd was still there hissing and wagging their heads, and yet this man in the early hours was realizing at Christ. And now he is thinking about confessing his sins. We indeed, justly.

Jesus had not performed a miracle before his eyes. The son of God had not come down from the cross. No angel had come down from Heaven and placed a crown on the head of Jesus. To take the place of the crown of thrones.

What was it then, in this predicament. That caused this man to be changing.

I think I can tell you something that will help you. I think it was the Saviour's prayer. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. It seems that I can hear that thief talking with himself. What a strange kind of man this must be. He said he was king of the Jews. The superscription on the cross says, the same thing. But what sort of a throne is this. He says that he is the son of God. Why does not God send down his angels and destroy all of this great gathering of people who are torturing him. If he has power now, as he used to have power when he worked the miracles that he talked about. Why does he not now bring vengeance. I would do it in a minute if I had the power. I would ask the earth to swallow them up.

But this man prays to the Father, forgive them.

Strange, strange. He must be different from the rest of us. I am sorry that I said one word against him. And when they first hung us up here - what a difference there is between him and me.

Here we are - hanging on two crosses side by side. But all the rest of our lives, we have been far apart. I have been a robber, a murderer, but here is one who has been visiting, healing the sick, raising the dead. Comforting and encouraging people. And now these people are crucifying him. What a strange world this is. And this man says, I will not rail on him anymore. Indeed, I am beginning to believe that he must be the son of God. For surely, only the son of God could forgive his enemies this way. I think that is what did it for this man.

This poor man was beaten and scourged, and nailed to a cross. And he hung up there for the world to gaze upon. And he was not just sorry for his sins. Did not he feel that he was convicted. And had to give an account of this. But when he heard the Saviour pray, it broke his heart.

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I heard a story somewhere of a bad boy that had run away from home. He had given his father no end to trouble. He refused all the invitations of his father that he had sent him to come home and be forgiven. And to help to comfort his old heart, he had even gone so far as to scoff at his father and his mother.

One day a letter came telling that his father was dead. They wanted him to come home to the funeral. At first, he determined that he would not go. And later, he said he would go and respect the memory of the good man, after he was dead. He sat through the funeral service. He saw his kind old father buried, and he came back home with the rest of the friends. His heart was just as cold as a stone. And when the old man's will was brought out, the ungrateful son found that his father had remembered him. Among all the other members of the family in the will. And had left him an inheritance with the others. Who had not gone astray.

those years in which he had been so wicked and so rebellious, had never ceased to love him. And that is exactly what our Heavenly Father does with us. That is just the way that Jesus does with people who refuse to give him their hearts. There are some who have been rebelling against him for years. Now Jesus loves you inspite of your sins. Even though you are a hard-hearted sinner at this very hour.

II. A PLEA - V. 40-41

We find that this man, criminal, turned to Jesus before it was too late. He said, "I wonder if you would remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

This thief confessed his sins. A man may be sorry for his sins, but if he does not confess them, he has no promise of being forgiven. The thief said, we are suffering justly. I never knew any man to be converted until he confessed. We read about individual after individual, in the Bible. But here is a prayer of confession to Christ. He calls Jesus Lord. And he begs to be remembered in his kingdom. That must be a kingdom in Heaven. For surely, there was no chance for this man to be remembered in any kingdom on earth. As the matters looked at that time.

I have thought many times about that simple plea. And just wondered what significance should that have and in what way should that speak to me. And to speak to you, this night.

First of all, this plea recognizes his guilt. Matthew and Mark reported that the two thieves joined with the crowd as the people mocked Jesus. Saying their scornful songs. If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself. V. 37. But Luke states that the second thief changed his tune. And during these hours on the cross

something happened to him. That he turned to Jesus, as a result and said, remember me. Those words were spoken in recognition of his guilt. For the Bible says that this man began to rebuke his partner, his companion in crime, he said to the other thief - do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence, of condemnation. And we, indeed, justly - for we receive the due reward of our deeds. V. 40-41.

Now the repentant thief spoke in the awareness of his guilt. He acknowledged that he belonged where he was. That justice had not been miscarried in his case. Justice had fairly been administrated.

Did you know, guilt is probably the most destructive of all emotions that we experience. We know that there are people who can minister to our diseases, but what is there that can pluck guilt out of a memory, of a man's heart. What is it that can take his troubled brain and cleanse it of poison. What is it that weighs down upon his heart. And say I am burdened with guilt. That is something that destroys. Hence, this criminal said, I want you to remember me because I am guilty.

Another thing about this plea is that it was made in the light of Christ's forgiveness. The Lord Jesus did not act on the cross the way men usually act. The horrible experience of crucifying men was either to fling from their lips vile words which would often be heard in the ears of decent men. Or else, they would cry out in agony for mercy.

But the Lord Jesus did neither. The world neither cursed those who put him there - nor did he plea for mercy from them.

Instead, the Bible says he looked and said - Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. V. 34.

The criminal who died with Jesus had never before heard a man speak like that.

I am firmly persuaded that the events which changed this man from a vile sinner and that of his companion, was one who remembered hearing Jesus praying for forgiveness. And on the cross, this criminal came face to face with the forgiving Christ. He recognized that Christ was willing to forgive. He believed in the ability to forgive. Because he said, Jesus remember me when you come into your kingly power.

That is simply marvelous. In the story of King Arthur, Sir Lancelot is described standing there with his wife in her unfaithfulness, at his feet, begging for mercy. And the words come out - and all is passed. The sin is sinned. I forgive
Thee as eternal God forgives.

But there are no words in literature like the words of our Lord. In so many places where he says - go and teach. Luke 7:48-50, your sins are forgiven. That forgiveness recognized by the thief on the cross, is available to each of you now. The Lord God offers you forgiveness for your sins.

Whosoever confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father and the Holy Angels. Now we are going to see later on, that Jesus fulfilled that promise. But let us move on with this plea.

Another thing, about it is - that the plea was made while there was still time. The thief died that day, but he never saw the sun set. He never again saw the stars sparkle in the Heavens. He never saw the moon glow like a giant fire in the sky. How long it was after the exchange with the Lord, before he died, we do not know. But it could not have been very long. Those words spoken to the Lord Jesus were among his last. Time for him was about over. He made his plea while there was still time.

It is possible for a person to wait until it is too late to do what he ought to do.

I read about a man, during the Revival Meeting, that people had worked with. The man was an outstanding person in the community. The story of his death was printed on the front page of the daily newspaper. But a man talked about that. He had witnessed to that man about accepting Christ, just the day before his untimely death. The man related that his deceased friend had told him he was too busy and involved to do anything about his spiritual need at that time. The grieved friend said he told me that he knew he needed to make a decision for Christ. But he was too involved in too many things to be concerned about it right then. His last words were - I don't want you to think that I am indifferent and unconcerned about my soul. I intend to get right with God when I have time.

The man said that on Sunday afternoon - and on Monday afternoon the newspapers announced the news of his death. It is possible for a man to wait until it is too late.

There is not a person listening tonight who has the luxury of knowing that he will

be here tomorrow, to make a decision for Christ. The Bible says, boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day shall bring forth. The Scripture says, what is your life. It is even a vapor that appeareth for a time and vanisheth away. James 4:14.

Is it possible to wait until it is too late. Here is a thief in his plea. Remember me. And he made it while there was still time.

III. THE PROMISE - V. 34

Now the Bible says that the Lord Jesus responded to that man's plea. And said, truly, "I say unto you, today you will be with me in Paradise." What a statement. Look at all the Lord Jesus had promised him. Jesus promised him a glorious future. He spoke of Paradise. The word is a Persian word brought over into the Greek, and then to the English, and translated into other language. But in the Persian language it speaks of a wall garden. Of inexpressable beauty - the kind of garden a king would have with all types of beautiful flowers. With ponds and swans. And all the rest.

It is said that ancient Persia, one of the greatest honors that one could receive was to be invited to walk with the King in his garden.

The Lord Jesus said that you will be with me in Paradise. He promised this repentant man a glorious future. He said it would begin that day - not someday.

Whosoever confesseth me before men - him will I confess before my Father and the Holy Angel. Today, thou shalt be with me. Christ fulfill his promise. And now darkness is going to fall upon the earth. Jesus is going to say - My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.

How sweet it must have been to Christ to hear that poor thief confessing him. To remember him. And he confessed him in just barely time enough before the darkness came on.

I want you to notice this man called Jesus Lord. Lord, remember me. When thou comest into thy kingdom.

And then you look at answered prayer - I will take you right up with me, into my kingdom today Jesus says.

The Saviour wants us all to remember him. And he wants to remember us in his kingdom.

Just think of this, my friends. The last the world ever saw of Christ - he was on the cross. The last business of his life, was the saving of a poor thief.

No doubt Satan had said to himself, I'll have that fellow's soul pretty soon. He belongs to me. He has been following me all of these years. And I'll take him because he is mine.

But Jesus promised him a glorious fellowship. He says, you will be with me. That man had lived much of his life in the underworld of crime. His associates had been lawless men, who had lived like animals. But he would spend eternity with his Saviour.

He had asked so little - and Jesus had promised so much. He was assured of a glorious fellowship.

Jesus always gives more than we ask or even think that he will give. Even Paul wrote - now to him who by the power at work within us, is able to do far more abundantly. That all that we ask or think. Eph. 3:20.

Think about the truth in relation to salvation. What in the world does Christ give us - and give a man in a new start.

What will Christ give the repentant sinner tonight.

✓ First, he will erase all of your past sins. He will cover them with his blood. And Christ will give you a brand new start. I know that you are interested in a new beginning aren't you.

✓ Second, he will bring you into right relationship with God. He will give you his righteousness - which is to make you right, before God. Which nothing can dissolve. Jesus said, my sheep, hear my voice and they know me and follow me. And I will give

eternal life to them. They shall never perish. And not one shall snatch them out of my hand. My father who has given them to me is greater than all. And no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. John 10:27-29.

✓ Another thing, Jesus gave this man his abiding presence - that he is going to live with this man forever. You remember, the book of Hebrews says, I will never fail you nor forsake you. 13:5.

✓ And finally, he gives this man hope of an eternity that will enable him to share a great inheritance. That he will never perish or fade away. All of this and more - does Christ give. No wonder Paul wrote, no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceive what God has prepared for those who love him. I Cor. 2:9.

The Lord God always gives more than we ask.

How marvelous - there hanging on the cross. This man heard the Saviour's cry - it is finished. He had seen the sphere thrust in his side - and Jesus had died before the very eyes of this man. And the first soul that he brought from the world with him after he died, was this man. Prepare a chariot, and make haste. And take him from the cross. And the angels came down from the sky. To take up the soul of this poor thief and welcome him. He had been washed in the blood of the lamb. And that my friends is what Christ wants to do for every sinner. He wants to save you. And that is his business - and that is why he came down from Heaven. And that is why he was able to deliver that man that day.

Somebody may say, did that man have enough time. Perhaps, it might have been the

first hour that that man had ever heard about Christ. Maybe he had never heard about him before. But you have heard about him. And many of you, that we are speaking to tonight. Did not give Christ your heart the first time that he asked you too. And there are some tonight that are further along than even this poor thief.

In England, in the mining district, a young man attended a Revival. He failed and refused for a long time - but finally, he said, I must find peace. Before I leave this service. He did find the Saviour. The next day he went down to the coal mines, and the coal fell on him, and he was broken. And they got him out - with two or three minutes left to live. His friends gathered around him - and they listened to catch the last words that he had to say. Here is what they heard him say, "it was a good thing, that I settled it last night."

Governor Nash went to the prison with the power to change the death sentence to a lesser sentence. The condemned man lost his chance to live. Because of his vile language. He could have been saved - he was almost saved - but he was lost.

On the cross next to Jesus, was a man that was eventually lost. But also, a man who was eternally lost - but yet was saved. There are people today - it is almost too late. Do you have any assurance of tomorrow. Could you sign a guarantee that God will give you another few days. No man has this. Thus, it may well be almost too late. But you can be saved now. Today, the gates of the kingdom of God are still open. You can still confess your sins to God and ask him to forgive you and grant you the gift of eternal life. Now, it is almost too late - what about you. Make your plea to the Saviour today.