

Almost!
Luke 23:13-25

Slide 1

On the southern border of the Persian Empire, there lived a great chieftain named Cagular who continued to defeat every detachment of Cyrus the Great's army sent to subdue him.

Finally, the emperor, amassing his whole army, marched down, surrounded and overwhelmed Cagular's forces. Capturing him and his wife, Cyrus brought them to the capital for execution.

On the scheduled day of their execution, he and his wife were brought to the judgment chamber. Now, Cagular, was a fine-looking man of more than 6 feet, with a noble demeanor.

So impressed was Cyrus with his appearance, that he asked Cagular, *"What would you do if I spared your life?"*

"Your Majesty, if you spared my life, I'd return home and remain your obedient servant as long as I lived."

"What would you do if I spared the life of your wife?" "Your Majesty, if you spared the life of my wife, I would die for you."

So moved was the emperor by Cagular's words and attitude that he freed them both and returned Cagular to his homeland to serve as its governor.

Upon arriving home, Cagular reminisced about the trip with his wife. *"Did you notice the marble at the entrance of the palace? Did you see the tapestry on the walls as we went down the corridor into the throne room? And did you see the throne on which the emperor sat? It must have been carved from one lump of pure gold."*

His wife replied: *"I really don't remember any of that."* "Well," said Cagular in amazement, *"What do you remember?"* His wife looked at him and said, *"I remember only the face of the man who said he would die for me."*

So this morning, I want to talk to you about the one who did die for us.

As you know, today is celebrated throughout Christianity as "Palm Sunday," the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

His arrival caused such a celebration by the people that the religious leaders in Jerusalem exclaimed, *"Look how the whole world has gone after him!"* (John 12:19b)

And for the next few days the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and chief priests tried again and again to trap Jesus with trick questions in an effort to turn the people against Him.

We know what the Bible tells us of the events of that week: the people wanting to crown Jesus as their king, the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus washing the disciple's feet, and their partaking of the Passover meal.

The Bible continues, telling us that after the Passover meal, they went to the Garden at Gethsemane where Jesus spent time in prayer, and of Judas bringing the Temple Guards to arrest Him.

Then, for the rest of that night, Jesus had to endure the scorn and abuse heaped upon Him during the illegal night-time trials before the Jewish Sanhedrin.

At these trials, the witnesses couldn't even get their lies straight, but the priests had already decided that He was worthy of death because He called Himself the Son of God.

And since only Roman authorities could order the death penalty, they had to wait till daybreak to take Him to the Roman governor.

When they got to Pilate that morning, they accused Jesus of sedition. Saying He sought to incite the people to rebellion.

All this is already familiar to us, so this morning I want to turn to the Gospel of Luke and focus on the scene where Pilate tries to release Jesus. It's found in Luke 23.

Luke 23:13-25, "Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him." But the whole crowd shouted, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.) Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him." But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will."

Slide 2

A poet once wrote, *"Of all the words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been.'"* If that's true, then one of the most tragic words in the human language must be the word *"almost."*

"Almost" speaks of aborted opportunities and missed chances. I'm sure that as long as this world exists, "almosts" will dot the pages of human history.

"I almost climbed the mountain." "We almost reached our goal." "I almost closed the deal." "We almost got there in time." "I almost got on that rollercoaster."

We have all had "almost" experiences. Yet, I believe the most infamous "almoster" in history would have to be Pilate because he almost released Jesus.

He almost lowered the gavel and said, *"I dismiss all the charges because this man is innocent."* He almost set Him free.

What a change that would have made in our perception of Pilate. He might be known as "St. Pilate" today. He almost did it, but he didn't. Yet he could have, and that's his tragedy.

He had the authority to do it. He wore the signet ring that said he had the power to do it. All he had to do was speak the word and Jesus would've been set free. And he almost did it.

Verse 23 says, *"But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that He be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So, Pilate decided to grant their demand."*

He listened to their voices. We could say that he listened to the voice of Satan. We've heard such voices. Voices saying, *"Go on - do it! No one will ever know!"* Satan beckons us into paths we shouldn't go.

But Pilate didn't have to listen to those voices. There were other voices to whom he could've listened.

He could've listened to his wife who sent a note that said, "*Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of Him.*" (Matthew 27:19). He could have listened to her voice. And, he almost did.

He could've listened to his own voice. Pilate was no dummy. He knew what was going on. He knew that Annas and Caiaphas, the chief priests, were corrupt and greedy.

He knew they were lying. He could've listened to his own voice, to reason and common sense. He almost did, but he didn't.

But Pilate isn't the only one who's played the game of "*almost.*" Some of us have played that game, too.

Yet the Bible teaches that there are no "*almosts*" with God. There's no "*almost*" heaven, no "*almost*" place where we go. It's either heaven or hell. And Pilate's tragedy could be our tragedy too.

Slide 3

As we continue reading about Jesus, we read about the crucifixion. Even though Pilate came that close to freeing Jesus, he didn't do it.

So, as we view that scene, we see soldiers going about their tasks. They were used to crucifying people. They had done it many times before.

First, they laid the crosses down upon the ground. Then they placed Jesus and the two thieves upon them, driving sharp spikes through their hands and feet.

Then they hoisted the rough wooden crosses into the air and dropped them into the holes that had held crosses before.

They probably drove stakes into the ground around the crosses to steady them, and then they were done. Jesus was crucified.

You'd think that by now the chief priests Annas and Caiaphas would've been satisfied. But there was something about the sign placed on the cross that angered them. It read, "*Jesus, King of the Jews.*"

Once again, they stormed into the presence of Pilate. We could only wish that Pilate had been as firm and decisive earlier, as he shows himself to be now.

When they came rushing into his presence, protesting the wording of the sign, Pilate says, "*That's enough. What I have written, I have written. The sign stays.*"

So, there He hung, between heaven and earth. Looking through tears and blood, He could see the faces of the people who had gathered around Him.

It may have been an unusually large crowd for there were no football games or soccer matches to watch in that day. So they went to watch the crucifixions.

And, as we view that scene and look at their faces, we look for a friendly face, someone we might recognize.

Where was Peter? Surely Peter would've shown up, but Peter isn't there, nor James, Andrew, or Bartholomew.

After the crosses had been set into place, the soldiers gathered underneath the crosses and begin throwing dice, gambling. In fact, we can probably see a little bit of ourselves in these guards.

Because sometimes we're so close to the cross, but so far away. They were right there, right next to the blood that was dropping to the ground.

They could hear the cries of pain. They could look up any time they wanted and see Jesus dying. And yet, their minds were somewhere else. In fact, they were rolling dice to see who would get His robe.

But Jesus is still about His Father's work. Listen to Jesus pray, *"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."* (Luke 23:34a)

In other words, *"Father, forgive the soldier who drove the nails into my hands. Forgive Pilate who found me innocent but sentenced me to die anyway. Forgive Annas and Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin and all the rest. And Father, also forgive the Christians who will meet in a church building in Fort Worth, Texas in 2021 because their sins nailed me here too. Yes Father, forgive them all."*

I don't know if we could ever pray that kind of prayer since we have a hard enough time forgiving our spouses, children, or even our brothers and sisters in the church.

Yet, Jesus taught us to pray, *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."*

Slide 4

In fact, did you know the gospels tell us that Jesus spoke seven times while He was on the cross? Three times before the darkness came.

- *"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."*
- Then He responded to one of the thieves and said, *"Today you shall be with Me in Paradise."* (Luke 23:43)
- And looking at Mary, His mother, and John, the apostle, said, *"Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.'* (John 19:26-27)

Then darkness covered the earth. The winds started to blow. Lightning and thunder rolled across the sky. The ground began to shake.

And when the storm was at its height, Jesus cried out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (*"Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthini?"* Matthew 27:46)

Those who stood in the distance could barely hear His words. Some said, *"Maybe He's calling for Elijah. Let's see if Elijah comes."*

But those who were closest heard what He said. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* *"Why have you left me alone?"*

At that moment, the sins of this world, your sins and mine, caused God to turn His face from His Son.

Then the darkness left, and 3 more cries came from His lips:

- *"I thirst"*
- *"It is finished"* and
- *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."* (Luke 23:46)

At this, the greatest victory of all had been won.

On a hill that looked like a skull, outside of Jerusalem, everything that God had worked and planned for was finally realized in the death, burial and three days later, in the resurrection of Jesus.

Slide 5

As an aside, there's probably nothing more consistent about life than its inconsistencies. The world says: *"Life is like a roller coaster with its ups and downs and twists and turns. You never know what'll happen next."*

But if there's one very strong message that comes to us from Calvary, it's that God is able to take all the inconsistencies, all the fragments of our life and weave them into a beautiful tapestry, just as He planned.

That's the message we need to hear. Because one day the sun shines, and the next it rains. One day we think everything's going our way, and the next our world comes crashing down around us.

One moment we're young and healthy, and the next the doctor tells us that he has some bad news.

Yet, Jesus is saying, *"It really doesn't matter because all of you who have committed yourselves to Me will find righteousness, goodness and victory, not defeat."*

Our despair is replaced with eternal hope, because that's the message of Calvary.

So, in the light of all that, our prayer this morning ought to be, *"O God almighty, help us never to look at the cross and see the One who died there without feeling the touch of a tear on our cheek, without feeling our hearts moved and broken. Let us never come and just casually look at it, and "almost" be moved by it and then turn away and go on with life as usual."*

Slide 6

Conclusion

You see, the ultimate tragedy in every worship service is that there are people who're almost ready to make a decision.

There are people who stand right on the brink of saying, *"I surrender all. I'm going to follow Jesus."* And they almost do it.

Others are like those soldiers casting dice at the feet of Jesus. They're so engrossed in what they're doing that they never look up and let the message sink in and make a change in their lives. They're so near and yet so far.

So, this morning, once again, we offer the invitation of Jesus, praying that if you're almost there, you won't turn away like Caiaphas and Annas and Pilate and the soldiers. But that you'll look, see and make that decision.

It's the invitation of Jesus, our Savior and Lord. I don't know how anybody can say "No" to Him, but some do.

That's why I pray that you'll answer "Yes," and make your commitment to Christ today.