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It's Never Too Late

The 2004 American League Championship Series

For all of us, there has likely been a time in our lives when we could identify with the predicament the Boston Red Sox faced as they squared off against their heated rivals, the New York Yankees, in the 2004 American League Championship Series (ALCS). Heartbreak, humiliation and defeat seemed inevitable as the Sox dropped the first three games and found themselves only three outs away in game four from the dreaded sweep. Sports pundits and most fans had given up hope as no team in baseball had ever come back from a three game deficit in the series. Bob Ryan wrote about the Red Sox in *The Boston Globe*, "They are down, 3-0, after last night's 19-8 rout, and, in this sport, that is an official death sentence. Soon it will be over."

The Lost Son

In the Gospel of Luke, Christ tells the story of a man who also found himself in the most desperate of situations.

**"He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."
Luke 15:16**

In this familiar parable, the prodigal son asks for and receives his inheritance from his father, abandoning his family and moving away to a distant land. There he squanders all his wealth on sinful living. Penniless and starving he is reduced to the despicable task of feeding pigs, even contemplating their feed (carob pods) as a source of nourishment. As a last resort he turns to begging and fails miserably.

Back from the Dead

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Mark 9:23

Those who follow baseball know that in a spectacular reversal of fortune the Red Sox pull off the unimaginable. They rally to tie the game in the ninth, sending it to extra innings and pull out the victory in the twelfth. They then go on to make baseball history becoming the first major league team to lose the first three games of a best of seven series and then win eight straight postseason games (four straight in the ALCS and four consecutive games in the World Series). Many consider the Red Sox first World Series Championship in 86 years to be the greatest comeback in the history of sports competition. Interestingly, slogans adopted by the Sox as they faced certain defeat included "Why not us?" and "We believe!"

Facing rock bottom, the prodigal son's hopes were nowhere near as lofty as winning a World Championship.

"When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." Luke 15: 17-19

In these three verses, the son finally understands what is necessary for him to begin his own comeback as he recognizes his own mortality, acknowledges his sin and unworthiness and discards his self-serving nature for one of service to others.

Forgiveness and Celebration

"For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found. And they began to celebrate." Luke 15:24

In the city of Boston fans united in a great celebration of the Red Sox unprecedented comeback victory. Likewise, the lost son's father is joyful at his sons return and calls for a feast of celebration complete with music, dancing, and extravagant gifts. The failures of the past are forgiven and forgotten by a loving father who never gave up on his son.

Obstacles and Excuses

Not all however, shared in the father's joy at the return of the lost son. The older brother was angry with all the attention lavished on his brother and considered it undeserved as well as unfair, something he expressed to his father in no uncertain terms. (Luke 15: 29-30)

In the world of sports competition, we consider overcoming past failures something to be celebrated enhancing the story of success rather than detracting from it. We are eager to forgive and forget and the greater the difficulties that are overcome the more praise and support we are willing to give. Sadly, many view salvation differently than an athletic event.

In the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in Matthew, Chapter 20, we find another example of someone who believes they have been treated unfairly. The first hired workers, who had agreed to a wage for the day, question the decision of the owner of the vineyard to generously pay all the workers the same wage no matter the hours they worked. The question of fairness and worth can be a real problem for non-believers and believers alike. When Christians exhibit the attitudes of the disgruntled workers and older brother it can be an obstacle and an excuse for those considering accepting Christ as their personal Savior.

The parable of the Vineyard workers illustrates that all who accept Christ will share equally in the benefits of Heaven and affirms that salvation is a product of God's grace, which is his alone to give and not dependent upon works. Would we really want to pin our hope for eternal life on what we deserve or have done in our lives?

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

A Comeback to Remember

Then he (the criminal) said, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23: 42-43.

This may seem an extreme example, not likely to resonate with those enjoying a comfortable existence measured by worldly standards. But is the important decision we have to make regarding salvation much different than that facing the two men hanging on either side of Jesus at Calvary?

- Both were clearly deserving of their punishment. Romans 3:23
- Both knew that they were going to die, that in fact death was imminent. Psalm 89:48
- Neither had anything positive to bring to the table as far as their lives were concerned. Ephesians 2:1
- Both had a choice to accept or reject the Son of God. Deuteronomy 30: 19

At the time, the exchange between the criminal on the cross and the Son of God may have seemed insignificant. Yet, this brief moment in history

recording God's forgiveness and mercy has likely provided hope and comfort to millions.

Today is the Day!

This study is titled "It's Never Too Late", but in reality there will come a day when that is not true.

"Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away." James 4:14; (Genesis 6:3)

This passage reminds us that we are mortal and when death overtakes us it will be too late. All enter into this world with an expiration date. We don't know when that day will come but failing to acknowledge it has eternal consequences.

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them. " John 3:36

We have examined secular and biblical examples of those who find themselves alone, broken and without hope facing insurmountable odds and certain defeat. There is no doubt that God sometimes uses these kinds of dire circumstances to bring clarity, focus and a right perspective to our lives. But even if we aren't in a crisis situation, the peril we face is every bit as urgent and real when our eternal future is at risk. Either way, if we haven't accepted Christ as our Savior it is time to begin our own personal comeback.

Earlier we learned of the slogans adopted by the Red Sox players as they staged their miraculous comeback, "Why not us?" and "We believe." Today, the most important questions many need to ask themselves is "Why not me?" and "Do I believe?" If you can believe and are willing to act on that belief you can be assured that a loving Father waits anxiously with open arms to welcome you home. He will forgive you and you will receive the full measure of His love and eternal rewards. That is the nature of our God, hopeful and eager for our salvation, forgiving and joyful when it occurs. That is a nature we as believers should embrace.

"Hear what God says: "I heard you in the hour to show you favor, I helped you on the day to save you." "Listen! This is the hour to receive God's favor, today is the day to be saved! II Corinthians 6:2

BIBLE STUDIES

Budget Week Bible Study

Thursday, March 17

TREASURER 'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)