



SAVED AT LAST



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Introduction: A Change of Heart

Our prayer list at our Wednesday night prayer meetings resembled an anatomy lesson at medical school. The requests were usually for physical problems, so I often reminded our members at the Small-Town Church to pray for the spiritual needs of their family and friends, as well as for their physical difficulties.

I was pleased when Mary Ann¹ asked for prayers for her friend, Mr. Welbourne. He was in the VA hospital with a terminal illness, but her request was for his salvation. Mr. Welbourne would die soon of lung cancer; and, according to Mary Ann, he had never professed Christ as his savior. We placed him on the prayer list and prayed for him that night. After my Bible study, Mary Ann privately asked me, “Will you go see my friend and talk to him about the Lord?” Mary Ann was a widow in the twilight of her life. I agreed to go, but I had an uneasy feeling in my stomach about it.

I had served for three years as the pastor of the First Small Town Church. Small Town had less than a thousand residents; the majority of whom were retired. Two days later, on Friday I drove the forty miles to the VA hospital to see Mr. Welbourne. For all my preaching about witnessing and reaching the lost, I had not witnessed to many senior adults and to none who were dying. I usually witnessed to young people in our community. I had much success with young people and had baptized many teenagers in the town.

As I made the drive, I admitted to myself that I did not want to talk to this man. I know that sounds unspiritual, but I did not know him. I heard that he was mean, and I honestly did not know what to say to him, or how to approach the subject of his salvation. Should I walk in the room and say, “I hear you are dying. Can I talk to you about Jesus?” The closer I got, the more apprehensive I grew.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all these names are changed for privacy, except my family members

I drove into the parking lot of VA hospital, parked my grey Honda, and went into the hospital lobby to ask for his room number. I found out where Mr. Welbourne was, took the elevator to the third floor. I strolled past the open door to his room and looked in, as usual, to see if the time was right for a visit. Mr. Welbourne was lying on his bed and an orderly was tending to him. Mr. Welbourne looked weak and near death. His skin was as white as the sheets on the bed and his white hair blended into his pillow. His oxygen mask covered most of his shrunken face and was clouded with moisture from his labored breathing. Mr. Welbourne was awake and talking with the orderly, though with great difficulty. I knew the aide would be done soon. I could have waited a few minutes until he was free. Instead, I took a deep breath and walked away.

I did not talk to Mr. Welbourne. I got in my car and sat there a minute debating. Then I quickly drove away. After all, he was not a member of my church. I did not know him. He was some other pastor's ministry problem. I went to a nearby golf course and played eighteen holes of golf by myself. I figured I would talk to him early the next week when I returned to the city.

When I saw Mary Ann at church on Sunday, I told her that Mr. Welbourne was busy when I went by. She told me, "He died Saturday." That was the day after I was there. I was stunned. I told her that I had intended to see him the next day and that I was sorry I did not get to see him. She looked at me with sadness and said through tight lips, "I hope he was saved." I swallowed and said nothing.

That night after church, I was reluctant to pray, for I had been disobedient. James 5:16 reads, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." I certainly did not feel very righteous. I gently prayed that Mr. Welbourne had been saved sometime in his life, but I had little faith in my prayers. How do you confidently pray that something has already happened in the distant past, when you had the opportunity to see it possibly happen recently?

I attended the funeral service on Tuesday, hoping to hear from the speaker about Mr. Welbourne's private relationship with the Lord. The service was at a funeral home in Small Town. Of those in attendance, I only knew the few who were my church members. The pastor began his sermon and it was clear to me that Mr. Welbourne had no church affiliation. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope." Sadly, Mr. Welbourne's family members certainly were the "others" referred to in this verse. They grieved without hope, and I grieved in private shame. The funeral might have been different had I been obedient and shared the gospel with Mr. Welbourne. He may have responded favorably to the gospel, or he may not have. I did not give him that choice.

The speaker did his best to paint Mr. Welbourne in a favorable light, though he never spoke of the man's relationship with the Lord. I knew that my selfishness might have cost this man the opportunity to be in heaven. I had been disobedient to so many commands in the Bible concerning witnessing to the lost. I often preached about witnessing but missed my opportunity when it came. Mr. Welbourne's blood is on my hands, for I did not warn him of the approaching doom (Ezekiel 33:8).

After the funeral I went to my office at the church to pray. I repented with tears over my unwillingness to share the gospel and asked the Lord for another chance to be obedient. I promised the Lord that I would not miss any other opportunities were He to bless me with other chances to share the gospel with people facing death. I searched my heart for some reason for my failure.

I realized that I had been afraid of people and that I valued others' opinions too highly. I allowed my fear of confrontation to keep me from being obedient to the gospel. I recognized that God knew all my faults and loved me anyhow. I began to accept that I need only concern myself

with God's opinion. His opinion, the only one that matters, is stated clearly in His word, and was demonstrated vibrantly at Calvary.

Every lost person is headed for hell. We share the gospel to convince each sinner to cry out to a merciful God, who alone can and will forgive his or her sins and fit him or her for heaven. Some who hear the word receive it, but others reject it. I repented for not valuing the word of God over the opinion of man. I also repented for being afraid of confrontation, when what Mr. Welbourne needed most was the gentle confrontation of the life-saving gospel. I asked the Lord to give me other chances to witness to people like Mr. Welbourne

Over the next twenty-eight years, the Lord allowed me the honor of sharing the good news about faith in Christ with thirteen people before they died, twelve of whom I know prayed to receive Christ. I was also privileged to train church members who also led six other people to faith, and each of these died soon after. Some of these who were saved knew they would die soon, and others were surprised by death. All, however, were prepared to face eternity because a believer shared the gospel before death came.

The following stories are about valuable souls who are now in the presence of Jesus for all eternity. Most of the names have been changed and a few of the details altered for the privacy of the families. Yet, every story is true and is a blessing from God Almighty, who not only saved each of these people, but He also redeemed this sinful pastor and blessed me with the honor of sharing His salvation with the lost. The following is attributed to Saint Augustine: "There is one death-bed confession in the Bible, the thief on the cross. There is one that none should despair, but only one that none should presume." Yes, far better it is for people to be saved early in their lives, but sadly, many are not, and God desires that none should perish and that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). We often used the word "saved" in our denomination to explain the transformation of one's life in meeting the Lord and surrendering to His will. Jesus said in Luke 19:10, "For the Son

of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” The first chapters are all about how the Lord answered my repentant prayer and allowed me the privilege to share His word those near the end of their lives. In some of the later chapters, I share how reaching the lost is taught and how the fire of witnessing is caught in how some people I influenced shared with people who were saved at last.

I do not share these stories to bring honor to myself or to my church members. You already read about my sinful state. I write these successes to motivate you, the reader, to share the gospel with anyone and everyone. I tell these marvelous stories of salvation to motivate pastors to witness to those outside the church family and to train his members to do the same. I write these stories to praise the Lord Jesus Christ who saved each one of these people with His precious blood and who continually gives unworthy messengers like me more chances to tell the eternal good news to terminal people. Some of these who were saved were physically terminally ill, yet all people are spiritually terminal and are closer to death every day. The mortality rate among humans is 100%. I pray these stories will result in many more people being saved at last.

Chapter One: Douglas: A Tall Boy

Brad was eleven years old and was already as tall as I was. Within a few years he would look down to talk to me. He was one of many young people at the First Small Town Church in a southern state, who accepted Christ while I served there as pastor. Most of these teenagers would eventually move away. God allowed me the honor of leading many of the youths in the Small Town to faith in Christ.

I often played basketball in my driveway at the parsonage with some of the teens. My wife joked that I would foul them hard, pick them up, wipe away the blood, and then lead them to Christ. Of course, she was exaggerating, most of the time. We had teenagers knock on the door and ask, “Can Brother Rick come out and play?” Brad and I fouled each other many times over the six years I served there. For most of those teenage boys and girls, I was the only minister they had ever known personally, and over a hundred of them prayed to receive Christ while I served that church. I baptized about half of those who had been saved. Only eternity will tell the ultimate outcome.

Brad’s parents were members at the church and attended faithfully. As they do until this day, I preached on many different topics on Sundays at the church, but I always concluded my messages with the plan of salvation. One Sunday morning after the service, Brad asked if he could come to see me the next day. We set a time for him to come the next afternoon after school.

Brad came straight from school the next day. The sky was overcasts and the weather was turning cold, though I was warming up with anticipation of a new birth. Brad shifted constantly in the chair as he sat in my office that Monday. I could tell he was nervous. His voice quivered when he said, “I want to know more about accepting Christ.” Of course, I was thrilled and took out a marked New Testament that I kept in my desk drawer for such occasions. I shared with him God’s plan of salvation in detail. He listened intently and asked a few questions. I remember Brad praying

in his quiet, bass voice to receive Christ. He discreetly wiped away a few tears and left happy. He carried the New Testament I gave him, signed on the last page by me as a witness and by himself. I prayed for Brad after he left and asked the Lord to help him understand the importance of his decision and to show evidence of it. I also prayed that he would follow the advice I gave him after he accepted Christ. I taught him how to read the Bible and how to pray. I also encouraged him to make his decision public as soon as possible. Jesus said in Matthew 10:32, "Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven." In our denomination, we believe that when one receives Christ, he or she should publicly acknowledge his or her faith in Christ. Near the conclusion of our service, I offer anyone there the opportunity to publicly profess their faith in Christ. We call this time in our service the invitation.

Within a few days Brad showed up at the church with a friend. Through my office window I saw them coming across the yard and I went outside to greet them. The sky was darker than when Brad came by himself, but I could not have been happier. Brad said to me, "Brother Rick, can you tell my friend Douglas what you told me the other day?" I was so excited.

Douglas was the same age as Brad. His mother was the church organist, so I already knew who he was. He was taller than Brad and I felt short between these two eleven-year-olds. We went to my office where we sat and talked. Brad said, "Brother Rick, I was telling Douglas about what we talked about yesterday, and he wanted to know if you would talk to him, too." How could I refuse?

Just as I had done with Brad, I took a New Testament I had previously marked and shared with Douglas a few verses from Romans, Ephesians, and the Gospel of John. I shared these essential truths: all are sinners, sin separates us from God, but He still loves us, and Jesus' death was God's way of paying for our sins. I shared that we must repent, receive God's free gift of

salvation, and confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior. While I talked to Douglas, I realized that I was also training Brad to share his faith. He listened as carefully as Douglas to the plan of salvation.

When I concluded I asked Douglas if he was willing to receive Christ and commit his life to the Lord. He answered, “Yes, sir,” and I led him in the sinner’s prayer. I remember how quietly he spoke as he prayed aloud before his friend and me. I congratulated him and recorded the event on a blank page at the end of the marked New Testament, just as I had for Brad. After Brad and I signed it as witnesses, I gave it to Douglas to keep, to help him remember that day.

The two boys left happy, and I rejoiced. I called a pastor friend and shared my excitement, and he rejoiced with me. Sadly, few members of the First Small Town Church would be excited. My church members did not complain when I led young people to Lord and brought them into the church, but they did not rejoice either. One member told a man I had led to Christ that the church across the tracks was better for his kind. I knew, however, that there was joy in the presence of the angels in heaven (Luke 15:10) and there certainly was joy in my heart.

The next Sunday Brad and Douglas came down the aisle together during the invitation, and in a few weeks, I baptized Brad and Douglas in the same Sunday morning service. Their parents were so proud of their sons.

Brad and Douglas grew as normal boys do, though taller than most. Douglas was the center on our church’s youth basketball team and Brad was the forward. I was the coach and spent many hours with these and other boys and girls in that town. Both Douglas and Brad occasionally got into trouble. Once I had to call Brad to my office and confront him about something he had done. He sat in the chair with his lip poked out and his attitude sour. Eventually he repented over his mistake and we parted friends. I also had to correct Douglas at times. I felt like a father as well as their pastor to these boys. I took them and other boys and girls to church camp each summer and watched them make decisions. I prayed for them and hoped for the best.

I knew these boys were saved, but they struggled with the pull of the world, as do most teenagers. I prayed for them and attempted to steer them in the right direction. Both remained faithful to the Lord and the church during my ministry at that church. Douglas was fun to be with and had a marvelous sense of humor. He grew to about 6'4" and had a striking appearance, with his sandy blonde hair and big blue eyes. He was skinny and his most prominent feature was his Adam's apple.

After six years as the pastor at that church, the Lord led me to another pastorate about sixty miles away. I served at my next church for seven years. I returned often during those seven years to the First Small Town church for special services and occasionally to preach or assist at a funeral. I kept in touch with some of the members and occasionally saw them in the large city nearby.

One day my phone rang. The voice on the other end was shaking. It was Stephanie, Douglas's mother. She told me, "Douglas was killed in an automobile accident today." She wanted me to preach the funeral with the current pastor of their church. I was shocked, and certainly agreed to preach. I muttered some words of comfort to Stephanie and wondered how she could go through this time. I prayed for her over the phone and hung up. I sat there for about half an hour, remembering Douglas's salvation experience, and the times I had spent with him. I was speechless.

Douglas had been working for a company that supplied materials to loggers. He was driving through the woods on a winding dirt road in his Volkswagen Beetle to a work site when a large dump truck came around a curve and hit him head on. Douglas had been killed instantly. He was nineteen years old.

As I prepared what I would say, I realized that I was grieving. The Scripture says to weep with those who weep. That type of empathy would be genuine and heartfelt for this funeral, for I was weeping myself. I was also sad for his family and his friends.

We all grieve but are not surprised when an eighty-year-old dies, whether from age or illness. When a child or youth dies, however, we mourn not only the loss of their life, but also what their life may have been. I was grieving not only the death of Douglas, but that he would have no more future on earth. I knew he was now in heaven, which was comforting, but I mourned that he would never marry, have children, or die of old age.

The New Testament scripture is silent about the death of the young, other than that Jesus revoked it on two occasions. In Luke 7:15, Jesus broke up a funeral for the son of a widow in the town of Nain, and in Luke 8:54, he raised the twelve-year old daughter of Jairus, the head of the synagogue in Capernaum. The Scripture, however, has much to say about how Jesus overcame death, which applies to young and old.

The First Small Town Church was filled with Douglas's grieving friends and relatives and the front was filled with flowers on either side of the casket. I stood at the front of the church for several minutes looking at Douglas as he lay in the coffin. When I left Small Town, he was still an adolescent. Now he was a grown man. I smiled to myself when I noticed that his Adam's apple was still his prominent feature. I said goodbye to Douglas, knowing that I would see him again someday in heaven, and we began the funeral.

Douglas's funeral was difficult. Heart-felt music brought out deep emotions in all attending. When I spoke, I gladly shared how Brad had brought his friend to hear the good news. Douglas' mother wept as I shared that I heard Douglas pray to receive Jesus into his heart. Douglas' family grieved, though not as those who have no hope. Their sorrow was tempered by the hope of the resurrection in Jesus Christ. The pastor of the church also brought a message of hope in Jesus Christ.

After the graveside service, Douglas's mother hugged me and did not let go for several minutes as she shook from deep crying. I held her and wept with her. She was smiling when she

looked up at me. As she let go, she simply said, “Thank you, Brother Rick.” Then her expression grew serious and she asked me, “Where was God when my son died?”

Her sincere question was not condemning or spiteful but probing. I gently said, “God was the same place He was when His Son died. He knows your pain and Jesus died so that the hurt is temporary.’

She smiled and said, “I needed to hear that.”

When Brad brought his friend Douglas to hear the gospel eight years before, and when Douglas prayed to receive Christ in my office at the First Small Town Church, none of us knew how long we had to live. A natural assumption would have been that they both would outlive me by two or three decades, for I was then in my mid-thirties. None of us knows how long we will live. I am sure that Douglas expected a long life. Instead, he got eternity. I rejoice that Brad brought his friend Douglas to hear the gospel and that he was saved at last.

Chapter Two: Craig: A Wasted Life

Craig's father spoke the saddest words I ever heard. He told me several days after the automobile accident that claimed the life of his son, "I knew this call would come one day. I just didn't know when." His son Craig started drinking in his early teens. Craig was polite and well-mannered when he did not drink. He was angry and combative when he drank.

I heard about Craig, who was in his mid-twenties, when I moved to Small Town to serve as the pastor of the First Small Town Church. Occasionally, he attended services at the church. His truck usually had a dented fender or a broken windshield. The broken windshield would be cracked from the outside, and one of Craig's hands would be wrapped in medical dressings. Four times during my six-year tenure at the church, Craig totaled his vehicle.

Craig's parents were financially successful, and they quickly replaced the destroyed vehicles each time Craig totaled them. When Kay, Craig's mother, came to talk to me about her son, I politely suggested that Craig should walk and not be rewarded with a new truck every time he crashed his existing one. She would shake her head and say, "I know. I know, but I just cannot let him walk everywhere. When we talked to him, he assured us this was the last time." We had that conversation often.

Once I gave her a book about tough love. She read it and apologized to me for not being strong enough. I realized that I was adding to her guilt and from then on, I attempted to encourage her. I prayed for Craig and his family. His older brother, who was married and had children, traveled this same road. Craig's older brother endured two difficult rehabilitation stays, the second one helping him stay sober and away from alcohol and drugs for good.

Craig was single, though he always had a steady girlfriend. He worked for his parents at their manufacturing plant and lived in a mobile home on the premises. I would stop by to visit Ron,

Craig's father, about some church matter. The tension in the office was noticeable. Craig would work hard, though he did not start his day at sunup as did his father and brother. His parents had started that plant, yet Craig acted as if he knew more about it than they did. Had he not been their son, they would have fired him years earlier.

One day Craig came to my office to talk. Coming to see me must have been difficult for him, for he was prideful and self-assured. Yet he sat in a chair across the desk from me and spoke quietly about his wasted life. He stopped from time to time, his lower jaw quivering. Through tears he choked out the words, "I can't go on like this. I need help." My heart was touched, and I told him, "Craig, I will do what I can."

I knew that Craig was already a member of our church though his lifestyle did not match his earlier profession, which was before my tenure at the church. I said, "Tell me about your relationship with the Lord."

"Non-existent!" he replied. I shared with him the good news of the gospel and told him that this was his only hope of change in his life. Craig listened with a look of determination. He genuinely hated his life. I offered him a new one. I intentionally focused on repentance with Craig.

Repentance is essential to salvation for everyone. Even when an eleven-year-old is saved, he needs to repent, though his sins are usually not as destructive as Craig's. A single sin is enough to separate one from God. James 2:10 teaches that, "Whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all." Repentance is even more essential when the habits of sin are ingrained in one's life, as they were in Craig's.

I taught Craig what it meant to repent. I used the illustration of a man walking away from God, doing an about face, and then walking back toward God. I told him, "You must turn away from the destructive sins of your past and move toward the God of your salvation."

He asked a few questions and eventually was ready to do business with God. I came around my desk and knelt at the chair next to his. Craig got on his knees and poured out his heart to God. He was broken and asked Jesus to save him. I remember the desperation in his voice as he prayed through his tears.

After he gave his heart to Christ, I instructed him on the importance of being in our Bible study program. "God's ways are neither our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts," I said. "Our thinking is wrong, corrupted by sin, and only through serious study of His word and time with the Lord Jesus in prayer can we begin to think, and act like Him." Craig assured me that he would be a part of our Bible study classes on Sunday mornings before the worship service. He thanked me and left.

I sat at my desk and prayed for Craig. Though I was excited that he gave his heart to Christ, I was not optimistic about his life. I knew he faced a difficult task, for addiction does not relinquish its victims easily. The Bible teaches in John 10:10 that the thief, Satan, comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. I knew that Satan would not give up Craig without a fight.

Craig attended church more often, and occasionally he came to our Bible study class for his age group. I knew when he was there, for I taught that Sunday School class.

Eventually Craig returned to his destructive lifestyle, though he attended worship services about once every other month. I tried to encourage him. One Thursday morning, he appeared at my office and asked me to take him to a rehabilitation unit. I agreed and called to make the arrangements. I spoke with his mother on the phone. She was cautiously optimistic, for Craig had tried rehab before.

Later that day, I drove him forty miles to the unit and we talked on the way. He was sober, so he was polite and contrite. Craig and I met with a counselor and spoke about the rehab. Soon his mother arrived. I prayed with Craig and left, hoping he would listen to the counselors.

Sunday at church I asked Kay how Craig was doing. She told me he had left the unit before Thursday night. He had stayed less than four hours in rehab. I shook my head in sadness.

For the rest of my time in Small Town, Craig continued his destructive lifestyle, though he often expressed regrets. Once when an evangelist came to preach a revival, he and I spoke with Craig. He was sure of his salvation, and once again he pledged to serve the Lord. As before, he did not keep his pledge.

Within a few years, I left the First Small Town Church and moved to another church. When I returned to Small Town for special services or to attend or preach a funeral, I would ask Ron and Kay about their sons. They would brag about their older son, but just say that Craig was doing okay. I knew that meant that nothing had changed and that they waited for the dreaded call.

One spring morning I received a call from Kay. She told me in a quiet, rehearsed monotone voice, "Craig was killed early this morning in an automobile accident." The call came at about 3:00 A.M. to inform them. The sheriff deputy simply said that he had been killed at the scene of the accident. I comforted her as best I could, and I prayed for her on the phone.

I thought about what I would say as I drove to the funeral several days later. I knew that Craig's life had been ruined by his addictions. I also knew that he had given his heart to Christ. Three verses in Jude provide guidance for those whose lives do not match their confession of Christ. Jude 1:20-23 reads, "But you, dear friends, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, expecting the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life. Have mercy on some who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; on others have mercy in fear, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh."

First in this passage are growing believers who stay in God's love. Second are those who doubt, which makes them mostly ineffective as servants of God. Third are those who are snatched

from the fire, which means they live like the devil. Finally, are those who are saved though even their clothes are polluted by the world. That was Craig.

Some people are saved even though they have no fruit in their lives, as was the thief on the cross. Not one of us is saved by the quality of his or her life; neither are we kept saved by the quality of our lives. We are kept saved by the Lord Jesus. Romans 5:10 reads, “For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by His life!”

Jude 1:1 reads, “Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, to those who are the called, beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ.” Since Jude was written to believers, all four groups in the Jude passage were saved, though only the first group pleased God with their lives and brought forth fruit. The Jude passage instructs those who walk with the Lord to have mercy on the other three categories of believers, and to actively pursue those in the fires of temptation.

In 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, Paul told the church at Corinth that there were spiritual babies, fleshly, and still walking as lost men. Yet, they were Christians. Craig never overcame his addiction to drugs and alcohol, yet I believe he sincerely received Christ. The Bible commands in Romans 10:9 that we believe and confess. Craig believed in Jesus Christ, asking for God’s free gift of salvation, and he confessed Jesus to me and to the church.

At his funeral, I shared my experiences with Craig, how I heard him pray with determination, and how he genuinely wanted to overcome his vices. I also shared some of these Scriptures about those whose lives do not match their confession. The words comforted his parents.

Craig’s earthly father had spoken the saddest words I had ever heard. Our heavenly Father speaks the most joyful words ever heard-- “Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,” Matthew 11:28. Craig is now at rest.

Chapter Three: Johnny: A Private Man

After I spent six years at the First Small Town Church, the Lord led me to serve as the pastor of the First Larger Town Church. This town was about three times the size of Small Town. Larger Town was still a small southern town and it was only fifteen miles from Large City. We moved into the parsonage and I began the task of serving the members, building the body of Christ, and preaching the word.

As the pastor of the church in Larger Town, I ministered to members and non-members alike. When I was in Large City nearby and knew that a resident of Larger Town was in the hospital, I would visit that person regardless of his or her church affiliation. Ours was the only church of our denomination, though a similar denomination had a full-time pastor as well. The two of us agreed that the Lord sent us there to minister to all people.

One day, church member Brenda called and said, "Brother Rick, my father is in a hospital in Large City. His name is Johnny and he has cancer and we know that he will probably die within a few months. I'm concerned about his salvation. He never joined any church. Could you go talk to him?"

"Of course," I replied. "I will see him this week." I assured her that the church members would be praying for Johnny and for her. I could hear the stress in her voice, though she tried to hide it. I shared with her Deuteronomy 31:8 which reads, "The LORD is the One who will go before you. He will be with you; He will not leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid or discouraged."

After I got off the phone with Brenda, I thanked the Lord for giving me one more opportunity to share His word with someone at the end of his life. I thought about Mr. Welbourne and repented once again. I knew God had forgiven my sin, yet I still felt the consequences of my

inaction. James 4:17 teaches, “So, for the person who knows to do good and doesn't do it, it is a sin.” I was going into Large City in two days to see a church member who was in the same hospital. I began to pray for Johnny.

Two days later, I drove into Large City and immediately went to the hospital. As I made my way upstairs, I prayed that God would be glorified that day. I found Johnny's room, entered, and introduced myself. Johnny did not look ill. In fact, he looked quite healthy. As we talked, however, he told me about the cancer in his body that would eventually claim his life. He spoke dispassionately, as though he were speaking about someone else that he did not know.

Brenda had informed me that Johnny's brother was a minister from another state and was in town to visit Johnny. He came into the room while we were speaking. We visited for a while and his brother left. I suspected he knew why I was there.

I talked to Johnny about his life and about death. “Johnny, my job as a pastor is to help people prepare to face eternity. May I share with you what the Bible says about eternity and how to prepare for it?”

“Please do,” he said. I took the marked New Testament I had brought with me and shared with him God's plan for our salvation. Johnny listened attentively as I read the verses and explained each one to him. He asked me, “So Jesus died to pay for my sins, and I do not have to pay for them?”

“That's right,” I replied. “The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that He who knew no sin became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God. Either we receive His free gift of salvation, or we spend an eternity in hell to pay for your sins. Which sounds like a better deal to you?”

“His deal, of course,” he answered with a smile. He said, “I never understood the plan of salvation before. Thanks for sharing that with me.”

“Would like to receive Jesus into your heart and accept God’s free gift of salvation?” I asked him. I shared that I would be honored to pray with him to receive Jesus (John 1:2).

“I did that when I was a child. I know I don’t attend church much, but I gave my heart to him then,” he answered.

I rejoiced with him about that decision. “I am so glad that you gave your heart to Christ and have settled that issue. May I pray for you before I go?”

“Please do,” he replied.

I prayed God’s blessings on Johnny, and asked God to either heal him or give him the grace he needed to face death. I asked God to be with his family. After my prayer, I shook his hand, gave him the New Testament, and left. Johnny expressed thanks for my words and my coming to see him.

As I walked down the stairs at the hospital, I thanked God for the opportunity to witness to Johnny, and I thanked God that Johnny was already saved. I was anxious to tell Brenda the good news about her father’s relationship with the Lord.

I went to the other hospital, visited with my church member, and then drove to the church, which took about an hour and a half. When I called Brenda, she was already excited.

“Thank you, Brother Rick for talking to my father. I am so thrilled that he gave his heart to Christ,” she said.

“You already heard about it?” I replied.

“Yes, my uncle just called and told me the good news,” she exclaimed.

Confused, I asked, “What good news, Brenda?”

“You know that my Daddy gave his heart to Christ today?” she said.

“He did?” I asked. “He told me that he did that when he was younger.”

“Then you haven’t heard,” she said. I could hear her excitement over the phone. “After you left, Daddy prayed to receive Christ, just as you showed him how. When his brother came back, he told him all about it. He said he had never understood the gospel before today.”

Brenda must have sensed my questions, so she volunteered, “Brother Rick, my father is a very private man. He just wanted to be alone, and so he told you he had already given his heart to Christ. After you left the room, he invited Jesus into his heart. My uncle said that he was talking about the Lord with everyone who comes into his room since then.”

I was overjoyed that God had used me to prepare Johnny for eternity. I celebrated with Brenda and hung up the phone. I sat at my desk and praised God for His goodness. This was my first opportunity to witness to someone who was dying since I failed to share Christ with Mr. Welbourne. I was surprised how easy it had been to share the good news. My fears had been unfounded. Johnny may have been resistant to hearing the gospel in the past, but facing death, he was receptive to God’s word.

I visited Johnny in the hospital numerous times over the next few months. He was happy and smiling every time I saw him. Even as the cancer destroyed his body, his spirit grew closer to God. One day Johnny went home to heaven. Brenda said he died with a slight smile on his face.

His brother preached the funeral, which was almost a celebration because of Johnny’s salvation. I listened with tears of joy instead of tears of repentance. This family grieved with hope because Johnny met Jesus before he died.

Brenda and her family genuinely mourned. They cried deep tears at the death of her father, but behind the tears was the knowledge that when Johnny died, Jesus met him and welcomed him to heaven. I praised God for allowing me the privilege of sharing His good news with Johnny. I thanked God that Johnny was saved at last.

Chapter Four: Lamar: A Procrastinating Man

A year after I moved to Larger Town, I assumed the duties as the head of the Larger Town Ministerial Association. While that sounds impressive, the membership consisted of three pastors. The pastor who had been leading the Association when I moved to Larger Town had been called to another church in another city. Since the third pastor in the association did not live in the town, I inherited the job. The Association did not meet a single time during the seven years I served in Larger Town, except when the pastor who moved away gave me the checkbook and instructions, and when I passed on the torch when I moved away.

Many of the area churches met together for a combined worship service the Sunday night before each Thanksgiving. There we took an offering to help people in need, including transients passing through our town. Larger Town was on a major highway and close to an Interstate Highway, so most every week people stopped by needing help. My job as the leader of the Ministerial Association was to screen those people and help them within prescribed limits.

After a few weeks of helping people, I decided to streamline the process. Instead of going to a gas station with transients every time they needed help, I went to one local gas station / grocery store and spoke to the owners, Lamar and Cathy, “You know I oversee the Ministerial Association. May I send transients here, call you with an amount, and pay you later that day?” Lamar and Cathy were pleased to be a part of this process and readily agreed. So began my relationship with Lamar and Cathy.

Lamar and Cathy knew the rules: traveling people who received assistance could only get ten dollars’ worth of gasoline (ten dollars bought plenty of gas in the mid 1990’s), a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter and a jar of jelly, some bottled water, and a few snacks. Local people could only get ten dollars’ worth of gasoline. Lamar and Cathy dealt with people in a professional

manner, helping them but following the prescribed limits. They understood this money had been donated by the good people of our community. I would come by later the same day or the next morning and pay the bill for the Ministerial Association.

About this same time, my wife and I began purchasing our gasoline at their store. They allowed us to keep a tab, which I paid at the end of each month. For over six years I was in this store several times a week. The store was across the street from the church I served. Lamar and Cathy often asked about the church, though they never attended. They kept their store open seven days a week, from sunup to dark-thirty.

I often attempted to talk to Lamar about the Lord. He carefully changed the subject every time. I prayed that one day I could speak with him about his relationship with the Lord. During this time, my wife had to miss a year and a half of work due to illness. We struggled, though we trusted the Lord. God always provided and still does. I was especially careful to pay Lamar on time every month. Lamar was a businessman, and I knew that if I were to witness to him, I must have his respect in business and finances.

Jesus said in Luke 16:11 “So if you have not been faithful with the unrighteous money, who will trust you with what is genuine?” Believers must be faithful concerning money in all dealings with those in and outside the family of faith

One day, my church treasurer Verna Mae called me. “Brother Rick. Lamar is in the hospital in Large City. I think he had a heart attack. Can you go see him?”

“Of course I will, Verna,” I answered. “I just saw him yesterday at the store. He said he felt badly, but he thought it was just indigestion. Thanks for telling me about this.”

I went to the hospital that day and found Lamar’s room. When I entered Cathy looked worried. “Cathy, Lamar, what’s going on?” I asked.

Lamar answered slowly, “I’ve got cancer.” We all were silent for a while.

“What do the doctors say about it? I asked.

“They say it’s serious, but they think they can help him. They said they can extend his life significantly. It will take a lot of chemotherapy and radiation. We are in for a long haul,” Cathy said quietly.

The hospital room was dark, and Lamar had a shadow on his face. I realized that this physical shadow could signify the approaching shadow of death for Lamar. I quickly said a silent prayer and started to talk to him about his relationship with the Lord. About that time his grandchildren loudly came into the room. I would have to talk to him another time. I prayed with him and left.

Within a few days, his treatments began. I saw Lamar often over the next week, but we were never alone. Finally, he went home between treatments. I stopped by his house to see him in a few days, and the house was full as usual. I said to Lamar, “When is the best time for you and me to talk privately. I would like to talk to you about the Lord.”

“I would like that, Brother Rick,” Lamar answered. “Why don’t you come Tuesday morning? The grandkids will be in school. No will be here but me.”

“Great. I’ll see you Tuesday around 10:00 AM.” I said and left.

Monday, I stopped by their store and asked Cathy to make sure no one else was there the next morning. She said, “I will be sure that you are alone with Lamar. He wants to talk to you.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “I appreciate your help.”

Tuesday morning, I drove to Lamar’s house and knocked on the back door. He greeted me at the door, “Come in, Brother Rick. It’s so good to see you!”

“I am glad to see you too, Lamar,” I answered. “How are you feeling today?”

“Not too bad. Just a little pain, but nothing I can’t handle,” he said as we moved to his living room. “Sit down over there, Brother Rick.”

We exchanged pleasantries about the weather and about his family. Lamar had three children and six grandchildren, though it seemed like twenty when they were all at his house playing. Eventually I took out my marked New Testament and told him why I was there.

“Lamar, I would like to speak with you about how to be right with the Lord, if it is okay with you?” I said.

“Please do, Brother Rick. I’ve wanted to talk to you for some time about this.”

“Lamar, I know that you may be facing death,” I began. “I hope and pray otherwise, but whether you live twenty more days, twenty more months, or twenty more years you still need to prepare to meet the Lord. Here is a New Testament for you. I have marked the Scriptures that tell us how to be saved. Each is listed in the front of the New Testament with its page number. Let’s look at each verse.”

I read each verse with him and shared its meaning. I shared with him that we cannot save ourselves, how Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins, that we must receive Jesus into our hearts, repent from our sins, and believe that God raised Him from the dead. When I finished explaining how to be saved, I asked him, “Mr. Lamar. Are you ready to give your heart to Christ?”

“Yes, I am,” he said.

I led him in the sinner’s prayer, and he gave his heart to Jesus. Lamar cried as he prayed, his voice revealing heartfelt emotions. When we finished praying, he was still crying.

“How do you feel, Mr. Lamar?” I asked.

“Wonderful,” he said. “Oh, Brother Rick. I don’t why I waited so long. I should have done this a long time ago. I almost missed it. I’m so glad I finally gave my heart to the Lord,” he exclaimed as he cried openly. My eyes also watered as we talked.

We celebrated his decision and I prayed with him, thanking God for His wonderful gift of salvation. We spoke a while longer about his serving the Lord with whatever time God gave him,

and I left rejoicing. By Thursday, Lamar was back at work for a few hours. I spoke to him at his store and he said he was feeling weak, though I knew his inner man was growing in the Lord.

Friday Lamar was back in the hospital with more pain. The next morning, he suffered a major stroke which paralyzed his vocal cords. Later that day I was with him in his room when his doctor came in to talk with Lamar and Cathy.

“Mr. Lamar,” the doctor said, “we need to put a feeding tube in your abdomen, since you cannot swallow or talk due to your stroke. This will delay your chemo and will greatly decrease its odds of success.”

Lamar weakly shook his head no. He took a piece of paper and wrote in scribbled letters, “No. I am ready. Send me home to die.” Cathy gasped but said nothing.

The doctor was not surprised. I suspect he knew this was the best course of action. When Cathy asked, he told them how Lamar would die, if that was what he wanted. Lamar shook his head in the affirmative and squeezed Cathy’s hand. He looked at me and squeezed my hand. I was glad that I knew he was ready spiritually. I held both their hands and prayed with them, knowing that soon he would die.

The doctors honored his wishes and sent him home. A hospital bed was delivered and placed in his living room. Home health nurses came by every day. The nurses prepared both Lamar and Cathy for what was to come and administered pain medicines. A pique line was installed above his right collar bone so the medicines could be administered effectively.

I visited with Lamar and Cathy every day for three weeks, which is how long it took for him to die. For the first several days he was awake and would smile, write messages, and grin at his grandchildren. His notes revealed his even temperament and sharp sense of humor. By several days later, Cathy would wake him so that he could speak to company, though he fell back to sleep quickly. After about a week, he never woke again.

I went by one morning and Cathy and I sat in another room and spoke about his funeral. She wanted a grave side service. “Cathy,” I said. “Lamar told you about how he received Christ into his heart a few weeks ago?”

“Yes, he did,” she answered. “Thank you so much for talking to him about it. I gave my heart to the Lord when I was younger. When I tried to speak with Lamar about it, he would say that he would eventually.”

“Cathy,” I said. “I would like to share his decision at his funeral service, and gently remind those in attendance that they need Jesus as well, if you do not object?”

“Please do,” she answered. “I know that Lamar would like that.”

I went home and prepared myself some lunch. I had just finished eating my meal when my phone rang. Cathy said, “Brother Rick, he’s gone.”

I went over to their house and waited with the family until the coroner arrived to take the body. We planned his funeral and I comforted them.

We buried Lamar on a Friday at noon. I spoke about Lamar’s decision and what a fine businessman he had been and his part in our ministry to those passing through and in need. I shared with the family and friends that they need not grieve as do the rest who have no hope as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. I said, “For each of us this time will come. One day a minister will stand and speak about your death. Will he also talk about your faith in Christ?”

As I drove home from the cemetery, I thanked the Lord for the opportunity to share with Lamar. He looked so healthy, yet within six weeks he was dead. I praised the Lord Lamar was saved at last.

Chapter Five: Preaching for Salvation

Verna Mae, a sweet lady in First Church Larger Town married her childhood sweetheart Joey, even though they were both in their late sixties. I performed the ceremony at the home of her daughter. The two had lost touch decades before and reunited late in life. Joey and Verna Mae were precious people who loved me like a son. Joey had been living on the other side of the country and had no church experience until he returned to the area of his birth to marry Verna Mae.

After seven years of serving as the pastor of the First Church Larger Town, I was contacted by Large Suburban Church in a neighboring state, where I served as pastor for over seventeen years. After exchanging visits, meeting with their Pastor Search Committee, and much prayer, I traveled to preach a trial sermon at Large Suburban Church. In our denomination, when a church considers a man to be their pastor, they typically invite him to come for a weekend and preach. The church members then vote whether to call that man or not as pastor, usually on the same weekend.

The Sunday morning, I preached the trial sermon at Large Suburban Church, I walked up the steps and sat in the chair on the pulpit and was surprised to see Verna Mae and Joey sitting on the second row of the church, grinning at me. Verna Mae mouthed the words, “We love you,” and smiled. I knew they came just to support me. Even though they were disappointed that I might be moving, they genuinely cared for me and my family.

I preached a sermon that challenged the listeners to serve the Lord and commit their lives to Him. As I usually do on Sunday mornings, I concluded my sermon with the plan of salvation, sharing how a person can pray to receive Christ and accepts God’s gift of salvation. I asked everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes and I led in a prayer to receive Christ.

I gave a public invitation as we sang a hymn. I invited anyone to come forward to make a public decision for Christ. A young man came forward and told me that he had just prayed to

receive Christ. He was a soldier on leave and would be going back to his assignment. After this decision, he would go back with the Savior in his heart.

As I concluded talking to the young man and turned him over to one of the Deacons, I looked up and Joey from Larger Town was standing there. “Joey,” I asked. “Why are you coming this morning?”

“Brother Rick, I just gave my heart to Christ. I’ve never been saved before. When you prayed that prayer, I prayed it with you and I meant it in my heart,” he replied.

“Joey, I am so happy for you,” I said. I prayed with him and spoke more to him after the service.

The Large Suburban Church called me as their pastor, and my wife and I moved within a few weeks. The last person I baptized at First Church Larger Town was Joey. Verna Mae was so happy that her husband was saved. Her smile was even larger than normal.

About ten months later, I traveled back to Larger Town to visit a minister friend and play a round of golf with him. The weather was cool and breezy as I rode into Larger Town. I stopped by to see Joey and Verna Mae. I had received a few emails informing me that Joey was not well. I surprised Verna Mae at the door.

“Brother Rick,” she exclaimed as she hugged me and kissed my cheek. “What a pleasant surprise. Come on in.”

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I would drop by and see how you guys are doing,” I answered.

Verna Mae looked at me with sad eyes and nodded towards the den. I knew what her look meant. “Joey,” she said with her usual big smile. “Look who’s here-- your favorite preacher.”

We visited for a while and talked about old times and how life often turns in unexpected directions. I could tell that Joey was quite ill. He had been in the hospital three times that year. After

a while, we said our goodbyes and I left. I suspected that the next time I saw Joey would be at his funeral. Within a month I received the call and preached his funeral.

I not only shared with the family and friends how Joey had given his heart to Christ, I also explained gently how they could also prepare for eternity. Verna Mae wept yet knew that she would see Joey again. Within five years, she joined him in heaven.

Joey was saved at the age of sixty-seven and died at sixty-eight. None but God knows how long each person will live. Preaching for salvation is important, for we do not know who in the congregation will be alive in a day, a week, or a year.

As I mentioned above, I share at each funeral how to be saved. I do not give a public invitation, nor do I have people bow their heads and pray. I do, however, make it clear that Jesus is the only way of salvation. I know preaching the gospel is not politically correct, but it is scripturally correct. People need to hear the truth, even when the truth is not popular. Remember, a lie is a lie, even if everyone believes it is true; and truth is truth, even if no one believes it. God's word will never fail. Isaiah 40:8 reads, "The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever."

While I was still the pastor of the First Larger Town Church, I heard that an old friend was in the hospital. Alfred was a member of a small church I had served as pastor while my wife completed college. He and his wife Florence were also our good friends. I visited him in the hospital in Large Town and we caught up on family and old acquaintances. I prayed with Alfred and Florence and left. I looked back as I left the room and Alfred was smiling at me with a large grin. I suspect he knew he was going home soon.

The next morning Gene, Florence's son called to tell me that Alfred met the Lord during the night. He did go home. I expressed my sorrow. Gene asked me to preach Alfred's funeral, and I

quickly agreed. Florence's son was a prominent businessman in Large Town and knew many other businesspeople.

When I arrived at the funeral home on Friday morning, I was surprised at the size of the crowd. The chapel was full. Alfred and Florence lived in a small town outside of Large Town and their church was quite small. Many businessmen and businesswomen, as well as church members and community members were there. As always when preaching a funeral for a believer, I led the mourners to celebrate the deceased's life, begin to learn to live without him, and to prepare for their own eternity.

I gently presented the gospel, urging each attendee to prepare for the day when someone would say a few words over their deceased body. "Jesus is God's gift to us all, and God's only provision for salvation," I said. "I urge you to receive Christ into your heart and prepare for the day when God calls you home."

After the grave-side service, one of the businessmen whom I knew spoke to me in private. "Rick, it's good to see you again," Marvin Meyers said.

"Marvin, so good to see you as well. I know you and Gene are friends. Thank you for supporting him with your attendance," I replied.

Marvin looked quite serious and said quietly, "You've given me much to think about. I wanted you to know that I listened to what you said and am considering it very carefully. Please pray for me."

"You know I will, Marvin. Anytime you wish to talk, call me," I answered. We exchanged business cards and said goodbye. As I drove away from the cemetery, I reflected on the significance of that conversation. Marvin and his family owned a successful business in Large Town. They also are all Jewish. I prayed for Marvin as I drove home.

Monday night, just three days later, I was watching the evening news when the announcer said, “Earlier today, prominent businessman Marvin Meyers died suddenly of a heart attack.”

I sat up quickly and looked at my wife. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Hopefully, something is right, not wrong,” I answered. I told her about the events the previous Friday. I did not know whether Marvin acted on what I said at the funeral, but I did know that he heard the gospel just three days before he died. I hoped and prayed that he had responded by praying to receive Christ into his heart.

I have attended funerals where the preacher never mentioned Jesus nor offered salvation to the listeners. Only God knows who will be next to die. We do not know, so we must not miss an opportunity to tell the good news.

I shared the plan of salvation at my grandmother’s funeral in 1981. My brother and I both spoke at her funeral and we both presented why Nanny would be in heaven. We spoke about Jesus and that He had saved Nanny late in life. We both encouraged the mourners to be prepared for their appointed day.

Months later, Nanny’s brother, Jack, told my mother that he had given his heart to Christ at the funeral. Uncle Jack, who was in his seventy’s then, lived about ten more years, and he lived them for the Lord. He heard the gospel at his sister’s funeral, and he responded by receiving Christ.

Luke 12:48 warns, “Much will be required of everyone who has been given much.” Those of us called to share the good news as preachers have been given much. We speak the word of God. If you have been called, I implore you to speak about salvation, and never assume that everyone present is already saved. Only God knows each heart and He “is not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance,” according to 2 Peter 3:9. Preach the gospel and give the plan of salvation, so that anyone listening may be saved at last.

Chapter Six: Jean: A Sinful Life

I became the pastor of the Large Suburban Church in December 2000. God truly blessed us with members who desired to see people saved and lives changed. I began witness training at the church, and many learned how to share their faith. Others desired to see their family members and friends saved yet were not yet ready to share on their own. One of those members, Sarah called me one day and asked me to see her father's wife, Jean. She explained that she was terribly ill and in a hospital in Capitol City nearby. Sarah hesitated, then told me further. Jean was not officially married to her father, though they had been living together for several decades. Sarah was embarrassed, though she was just telling me the details of Jean's life.

Within a few days, I visited the hospital room of Jean. As I entered and identified myself, she said. "Sarah sent you, didn't she?"

I nodded and said that Sarah cared about her very much. She smiled. Jean was not upset that Sarah sent me, as she was just expressing what she knew, that Sarah cared about her. As we spoke, it was clear that this aged lady was uncomfortable talking to me, as is often the case when unchurched and lost people speak to a preacher. I silently observed that Jean talked to me as she must have when she received the bad news about her health. She acted as if she had no choice.

As I had prayed in preparation for this meeting, I remembered how Jesus spoke to the woman at Jacob's well in John 4. He did not condemn her but offered her living water. I realized that in the eyes of the Lord, little difference existed between the woman at the well and any of the disciples, and little difference existed between Jean and me. We all are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and none earn any of God's great gifts. As my friend Don Wilton often says, "The only difference between the best of us in here and the worst of them out there is the blood of Jesus."

I spoke with Jean as if she knew little or no scriptures. As I explained the word of God concerning sin, death, and eternal salvation or condemnation, she listened attentively. She asked a few questions that I answered as best I could. Eventually, I asked her if she was ready to open her life and heart to the Lord Jesus, confess Him as her savior, and repent of her sins. She smiled and said she was ready. She almost seemed relieved that salvation was that simple. I thought she might have expected to have to do something hard, but then no one could be saved.

We prayed together and she confessed her faith in Jesus, stating that she believed He rose from the dead, that he died on the cross for her sins, that she repented of what was wrong in her life, and that she accepted Him into her heart, as required in John 1:12. I recall the look on her face when she finished praying. Her appearance had changed from fearful to peaceful. Her expression spoke of the genuineness of this decision.

She laughed lightly and smiled. She told me she was saved, and she knew it. Jean thanked me profusely for coming to see her. I thanked her for listening so carefully and taking this seriously. We spoke about the rest of her life. While her condition was serious, though not necessarily fatal, I challenged her to live whatever time remained for the Lord. She told me she would.

Later she told her live-in husband about her decision. He was overjoyed. While he knew their relationship was wrong, he claimed to have been saved many years ago. I quit being the judge of people long ago. God knows my sinful nature and I know His desire to see people saved, according to Ezekiel 18:23, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?"

Jean eventually returned home. She remained quite ill and, within a few months, she passed away. I was able to visit her before she died, and she assured me of her readiness to face her Maker. Years later, her live-in would face death, and I was able to discuss salvation with him and help him understand what it meant. We prayed together and he also asked Jesus to forgive him and save him.

Because a father's daughter cared about her father's live-in, Jean was saved at last. Years later, her father was also saved at last. To God be the glory.

Chapter Seven: Eli and James: A Mean Man and A Hard Man

The call came from a friend in the church, a man committed to seeing people saved. “Jerry,” I said. “What’s up?”

“I need a favor,” Jerry said slowly. “My wife’s dad is in the hospital and it doesn’t look good. Will you go see him? His name is Eli.”

Of course, I agreed to see him, then Jerry told that his father-in-law was a mean man, and that he had no time for preachers, so, “Get ready,” he said. He had no idea, but those words were music to my ears. I just knew that the Lord was testing me with another mean man. I assured Jerry that I would see his father-in-law and that I would share the gospel with him.

“Good luck. He won’t listen to me at all,” he said. I told him that often family members will not listen. I would see Eli the next day. I prayed that God would soften Eli’s heart, so that when we talked, he would be receptive.

The next day, I drove to the hospital, excited that I was being obedient, and hoping that God would save Eli. I thought often of Mr. Welbourne with regret. As I entered the room and introduced myself, I fully expected anger, but I felt no fear. Eli, however, was as gentle as a lamb. He was grateful I came to see him and polite to a fault. I thought about how people often are mean to family members but not to strangers.

I asked Eli if I could share with him how to know that you will go to heaven when you die. He smiled and said he figured out that Jerry had sent me. Then he said, “Please share with me.” I opened my bible and read scripture to him from Romans, Ephesians, and the Gospel of John. I told him how we all sin and that Jesus paid for our sins on the cross. From John 3:17-18, I shared how we are measured by God based on whether we trust in Jesus or not, and not on how much we do or do not sin.

When I asked him if he wished to confess Jesus as his savior, repent from his sins, and accept Christ, he said yes. We prayed together and I shared with him about living with and for the Lord however much time he had left. Eli was so appreciative that I came to see him. I almost regretted that he did not put up a fight, but I rejoiced anyhow. God saved another.

When I told Jerry about it, he said laughingly, “Uhn uh. You are serious? He was kind and grateful?” I assured him Eli was saved. Jerry was rejoicing along with his wife. Within six weeks, Eli went to glory, not because of anything he did or did not do, but because of what Jesus did for him. His family cared enough to be sure he heard the gospel from someone to whom he would listen.

I shared at Eli’s funeral about his decision to trust in Jesus. His family was relieved to hear of his conversion. What a difference obedience of His servants makes in a funeral! God did a great work, and Eli was saved at last.

James was a hard man. He owned a business and fit the profile of a determined Type-A business owner who ran all aspects of his life, and a few other people’s as well. For decades, he ran his own HVAC installation and repair company. James had that touch with air conditioning and heating systems that appeared like magic to his customers. All his workers, including one of his sons were trained to an exacting work ethic, just like James. Others saw him as tough and noncompromising, but he saw himself as right on most subjects.

When one of his sons asked me to see him in the hospital, I knew what type of man James was. I had met him at a few church events, particularly where his granddaughter and other children sang and quoted scripture while parents and grandparents smiled and sang the words along with their loved ones. James had been at our church for many a Kodak moment.

James had terminal cancer and was determined to beat it as he had every other obstacle he had faced. When I visited him first, he was in ICU and was in foul mood. He did not particularly

want to talk to me, but he knew that he should. I ascertained that James may need multiple visits, simply because he was a boss. The eye of the needle is small for those in charge, as well as for those with wealth. These often go hand in hand, and certainly did for James. Luke 18:24-32 reads, “For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God,” (King James Version, or KJV).

For our first visit in ICU, I got to know James a little. It helped that I was close to his son and his family, having baptized his granddaughter. I had met another son, so we discussed family and business. He was surprised that I previously owned three businesses when I was a bi-vocational pastor back in the 1980's. When we spoke of business issues, he obviously respected my opinion more after learning of my business experience. I could only stay for a while, so I asked him if next time we could discuss spiritual preparation. He agreed with a slight smile.

A few days later, I saw his wife in the ICU waiting room before going in to see James. We spoke briefly and I told her the topic of today's visit. She was pleased and said she would pray. When I came into the room, James was in obvious pain, yet he was glad to see me. After a few minutes, I ask if I could share with him what the bible says about being ready to meet the Lord. He agreed.

I took my time and presented the gospel using many scripture texts. I wanted James to understand what he was doing, and I sensed he was a man who would not listen to a short presentation. I started in Romans, showing that all have sinned and that the price of sin is death. I then shared from Ephesians about how we are not saved by our efforts. Returning to Romans, I shared how God paid for our sins while we were still sinners, and what God expects from us so that we may be saved. I told him that we must confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead. I then concluded with John 1:12, that those who believe on His name and receive Him become God's children. He listened attentively.

When I was finished with the gospel presentation, he asked if he could trust in Jesus now. I told him yes. I shared with him about praying to God and admitting that he was a sinner, expressing his belief in the resurrection of Jesus, and professing that Jesus is the Lord of his life. For the first time since I met him, he smiled big and said he was ready. I asked him if he would like me to guide him through the prayer and he said yes. I told him to be sure he was praying this from his heart and not just repeating words. He told me clearly that he was ready to be right with God and be saved. We prayed together and, when we were through, I asked him if he was serious. “As serious as I have ever been about anything,” he replied. I left him a bible and told him where to read, when he felt like reading, being sick and all. He took it and told me he would begin to read it.

About two months later, James faced judgment with Christ in his heart. I preached at his funeral and was able to share with many others who needed to make the same decision. Before he died, James admitted that he wished he had done this earlier in his life. I agreed that would have been better, but it was still great to be saved at last.

Chapter Eight: Beth Ann: A Second Chance for a Prideful Woman

Bill pulled me aside at church. “If you are in Capitol City soon and at Baptist Hospital, my sister-in-law is in a room there. She was recently diagnosed with leukemia. Will you go see her?”

“Of course,” I said. “Does she have a pastor?” I always ask in case it is a pastor I know, so we can coordinate our ministry. If I do not know the pastor, I will contact him and let him know I am going by to see one in his charge.

“Her family is from a different denomination and their priest does not know the family well. He just arrived on the scene. I know they attend church some, mainly on holidays, but I don’t know if she knows Jesus. I just want to be sure she’s saved,” Bill stated as he wrote down the room number for me. I told him I would see her within a few days and would tell him how it went.

I vividly recall walking into the room and seeing Beth Ann sitting up in her hospital bed, talking on her cell phone. She looked up and I handed her my card. She had seen me at a few church functions, the kind where everyone brings a camera to photograph cute children. She lifted a finger as if to ask me to wait, so I did. After a while, it became obvious that she had no intention of talking to me. Her side of the conversation was only empty gossip. She used that call to keep me from talking to her. Honestly, the verse about casting your pearls before swine came to mind, and I said to her, “I’ll see you later.” As I left, I prayed that God would prepare her heart for the gospel.

Beth Ann was a successful businesswoman, and she was always busy. Within a few weeks, she was back at work, her leukemia quickly in remission, probably in her 30’s. I did not know the details of her recovery but continued to pray that the Lord would give me a chance to talk to her about her salvation. Bill kept me up to date on Beth Ann.

As time passed, I occasionally thought about Beth Ann, taking that as a reminder from the Lord to pray for her, so I did. About a year after I first met her, Bill told me Beth Ann was back in

the hospital, this time in ICU, and that it was clearly terminal, the leukemia returning with a vengeance. I was sad to hear that, but also hoped that now she would listen to the good news of the gospel before it was too late.

Within a few days, I saw Beth Ann. This time, she was in ICU with numerous tubes attached, and was bleeding from everywhere. She had a tube down her throat, but in God's kindness, she was wide awake. This time, when I knocked on the door, she used all her strength to sit up. I appeared to be painful to sit up, yet she did. She then motioned for me to enter. She gave me her undivided attention. I knew God had prepared her heart. Her eyes told me what her voice could not- she knew she was dying and was ready to get ready.

As I spoke to her, tears from her eyes made their way around crusty blood where she had been bleeding from her eyes. The tears were clear and said what her voice could not. I felt immense compassion for her and shared with conviction the good news of Jesus Christ.

I told her that being a part of any church, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Catholic, or Pentecostal meant nothing without a personal relationship with Jesus. I told her that I was not there to talk about church, but about the Savior. She listened attentively as I shared Scriptures. I had a New Testament with me, but she pointed to her eyes and shook her head, "No," so I knew she could not read in her condition. As I read aloud the scriptures to her, I thought about the prideful woman almost a year ago who had not time to listen. Now she wept over the words of grace and forgiveness.

When it was time to respond, I asked if she wanted to pray and acknowledge her trust in the Savior and express her belief in His resurrection. She nodded yes. I knew that from her background, one more prayer would have little significance, so I explained that in this prayer she was admitting to God that she was a sinner, that she could not save herself, and that she believed Jesus died on the cross for her sins. I further explained that in this prayer she would confess to the Lord in my hearing

that Jesus is her Lord, and that she believed that He rose from the dead. I also explained that for whatever time God allowed her she would commit to living for Him.

I knew she could not speak, so I held her hand and asked her to say a phrase at a time after me. I asked her to squeeze my hand with each word. So, I prayed, “Dear Jesus.” She responded by squeezing my hands as if saying, “Dear Jesus.” As I led her in this prayer, she squeezed my hand with each syllable, and cried even more. When we finished our prayer, I asked her if she had given her heart to Jesus, if she received Him into her heart, if she repented of her sins, and if she confessed Him as her Lord and Savior. She smiled with new tears and nodded affirmatively. What a difference a year made.

Before I left, I prayed for her healing. As I told her, “Who knows, maybe God will choose to heal your body as He has today healed your soul.” She looked so peaceful when I left. I knew that Beth Ann was ready face death, whenever it would come.

On the way home, I called Bill and gave him the good news. He was excited but told me Beth Ann’s family in the waiting room was unhappy since I was not their priest. Bill said before I could answer, “Don’t worry. The one the most upset is the bar owner in that family.” Beth Ann died within a week. I attended her wake and a few family members thanked me for seeing her. I told each one that Beth Ann trusted in Jesus and was prepared to die.

As I reflected on this with joy, I realized how many people are aging or facing an approaching death and believe their church membership will be sufficient. John 3:17-18 reads, “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God,” (KJV). Church affiliation is not mentioned in this text, but a relationship with Jesus is. I pray that many others will hear this message, so that, like Beth Ann, they can be saved at last.

Chapter Nine: Diane, Randy, Rocky, and Sharon: Secondary Witnessing

As we continued our witness training at Large Suburban Church, many of our members learned how to share their faith and the gospel message of Jesus. Each week we heard story of people who were being saved. Some of these were in prison. Our church had an awesome ministry, called 3:16. People went weekly to several jails and prisons in our area to witness. We often went to other institutions to share with juveniles with behavioral problems or with recovering addicts. Others traveled to Romania or Peru on medical mission trips, where they shared the gospel with people there who needed to hear it.

Mary, one of the ladies in our church, heard about a lady in a town 50 miles away who had cancer. Her name was Dianne. Mary's mother was Puerto Rican, and Dianne was also. One day, Mary and two other church members visited Dianne. They found out some needs of hers and let the church members know of this, so many began to give money, others food, and some Walmart gift cards. Dianne had four children and a husband. The husband could not work since he was taking care of her and four children around the clock. Dianne was bed ridden and near death.

The church family at Large Suburban Church was generous when it was needed, and this was quite a need. Someone was ready to purchase a new clothes dryer, so they donated their used one that worked fine. Other members drove it to the town an hour away and installed the dryer, so the family no longer had to dry clothes on clothes lines inside, since it was winter.

I never met Dianne, but many in our church did. After it was obvious to Dianne that our love for her was genuine, she was ready to hear about the Lord. Mary used her witnessing training and shared the gospel with Dianne, while her husband listened. Another lady kept the children busy with fun games, and another lady prayed the whole time, just as they had learned in witness training.

As Mary shared, Dianne was convicted of her sin and was ready to pray to receive Jesus into her heart. She prayed with Mary, confessing her faith in Jesus. Mary rejoiced, and then her husband said, “Can I pray also?”

“Of course,” Mary said, and led him to the Lord as well. Even as they faced her death, Dianne and her husband celebrated their new birth. Our members who visited them said the difference was obvious. Where they before were humanly optimistic against hope, now they were certain about eternity. Many of our church members attended Dianne’s funeral and continued to minister to her husband for quite a while, until, after his return to work, he could support his family. God continued to bless him. Mary was thrilled that the Lord used her to be sure that Dianne and her husband were saved at last.

Randy was a middle-aged member of Large Suburban Church and lived nearby. His aged mother was respected by the membership for her love for the Lord and her service to Him. One day when I visited with her, she told me to, “Go see someone who needs to be saved instead of visiting this shut in.” I told her I would do both. She revealed her heart in her statement to me. Her son, Randy was a member of the church, but obviously did not know the Lord. His lifestyle gave evidence of an empty life and his vain attempt to fill it with anything but the Lord.

Once Ray and I visited him on a Monday night. As we arrived, we noticed he was having a party. Ray asked if we should leave. I told him let’s go see Randy and see what happens. We met many people we did not know, all drinking. Others shouted, “Hey Preacher!”

We finally found Randy in the kitchen and he looked serious. He was glad to see us. He said we get to settle an important disagreement. The way he said it, I was thinking it had something to do with life-or-death issues. Ray and I leaned forward, and he said, “Catfish or Okra?”

“What?” I said.

He repeated it and added, “Which is fried more, Catfish or Okra? Which is it?”

Ray and I smiled and looked at each other. I said Catfish and he said I was wrong. I realized Randy was in no condition to speak about eternal topics, so we stayed a while and left, after speaking to many people who were all very relaxed.

Later that year, Randy's mother passed away. The church mourned and celebrated the homegoing of this sweet servant of God. Within a few months, Benny, another of our members visited Randy and found him alone and sober, still grieving the loss of his mother. Benny and two others shared the gospel with him with an emphasis on knowing Jesus and not on church membership. The Holy Spirit convicted Randy and he was saved. Benny shared that Randy genuinely gave himself to the Lord, recognizing Jesus as Lord. We celebrated this new conversion.

Benny continued to reach out to Randy to help him grow in the Lord. His sinful lifestyle made discipleship difficult, but Benny persisted, visiting with Randy, and teaching him how to serve the Lord and grow.

Within a few months, Randy suddenly died from a heart attack. We were all surprised, yet we knew he had been saved at last. Within a year, his grown son, Rocky, also gave his life to Jesus. I had spoken to him often, once in the Emergency Room where a doctor told him he would die if he did not alter his lifestyle. Rocky was powerless to do so, also caught in the grip of sin, like his father. Many of us witnessed to him often.

One day, Benny saw him again. The two had grown up together in the church, and Rocky was ready to surrender to Jesus. Benny prayed with him and led him to faith in Christ. Benny taught him how to serve the Lord, as he had his father, Randy. Later, Benny told us all about Rocky's salvation. We again rejoiced. Rocky attended church some, though his health was failing. Within a year, Rocky also died. I was saddened that for both Randy and his son Rocky, who both died years early because of sin. Yet, I rejoiced in the knowledge that both Randy and his son Rocky were saved at last.

Kara and her husband Donnie traveled often with our church group to Romania, working tirelessly in medical missions. Donnie, a deacon at our church, also preached every week in a local prison, sharing Christ Jesus with new inmates. One day Kara received a sad phone call that her mother had died. Her mother had lived in a neighboring state and was a believer. Kara and Donnie made the sad six-hour drive for the funeral and all that entails. Donnie had been asked to preach the funeral, since the local minister had just come to the church and did not know Kara's mom. He had never preached a funeral, so he asked me to share with him an evangelistic yet respectful sermon. I gave him the notes to a message I had often preached at funerals and told him I had heard of people being saved during the service, as had been my Uncle Jack.

After the funeral, Kara and Donnie were at Kara's mom's home with Sylvia, sister to Kara. In their grief, Sylvia said to Kara that she seemed to be not too sad. Kara told her how she and her mother had spoken about salvation and that her mother had assured her about her salvation, that she was ready to die. She had been ill for many months, so Kara had many opportunities for that discussion.

Kara asked her sister if she was prepared. Sylvia asked her to share with her how to be saved. Kara began to tell her the plan of salvation, sharing scriptures from Romans about how we are all lost and need to be saved. After a while, Sylvia got up and ran from the room. She shouted, "I can't talk about this now!" Kara was sad and bowed her head, saying a prayer for her sister.

When they returned a few days later, Kara shared this story and asked us to pray for Sylvia. We began to pray that God would send someone to lead her to Jesus. Several months later, Kara and Donnie missed Sunday morning church. I thought they may be visiting their grown son, but they came that evening, beaming with good news.

That morning, just before Kara and Donnie were walking out the door, Sylvia called her crying. "I can't wait anymore! I am ready! Please tell me the rest so I can be saved!"

As they cried together, Kara shared while Donnie prayed. She started over and shared the plan of salvation, how to know that you are saved, and how to begin to serve the Lord. Eventually, her sister prayed with Kara and gave her heart and life to Jesus, committing herself to serve Him for the rest of her life. Kara was so excited, as were we all. What a great day it was!

Sylvia found a local church and started attending, growing the Lord. About ten months later, she died from a sudden heart attack. Kara was devastated, having lost a mother and a sister so close together, yet she was at peace. Again, Donnie preached at the funeral, along with the local pastor. As sad as she was, Kara knew for sure that her sister Sylvia was saved at last.

Chapter Ten: Betty: Would not Talk to Momma

Sharon served as my administrative assistant and was excellent at what she did, which was to make me look good. Her skills amazed me as she single-handedly ran our office at the Large Suburban Church. With up to four full-time staff people, Sharon managed all out schedules, church newsletters, bulletins, supplies, and records, everything except the financials. She was a member of another church a few miles away, and her elderly mother, Clara was a member of yet another church in our area.

Sharon was already working there when I came in December 2000, and I slowly learned more about her family. Betty, Sharon's older sister lived on the other side of Capitol City and they saw each other often. From how Sharon talked about her sister and brother-in-law, they were not saved. One day she told me that Betty was in the hospital and had a serious respiratory illness. Her mother Clara attempted to talk to Betty about her salvation, but she would not talk to her mother about it.

I learned long ago that often family members are often reluctant to discuss spiritual issues with each other. Many others, like Kara earlier, can share Christ successfully with their family. Betty would not discuss it with her mother. I visited her mother in the ICU waiting area and she asked me to talk to her daughter about salvation. Clara was so concerned about her daughter and knew from her words, lifestyle, and actions she did not know the Lord Jesus Christ.

I prayed as I washed my hands in preparation to enter ICU. When I came in the room, she smiled, recognizing me as Sharon's boss and sort-of pastor, though Sharon had a fine pastor of her own. We began to talk, and she told me about her condition. After a while, I asked her if I could share with her how the bible tells us to be prepared for death. She said that I could, so I began to share with her the good news. For those with a church background, I use fewer verses. Though

Betty grew up in church, she had been away for decades, so I shared many bible verses, watching her face to see if her attention and understanding stayed with me, each step of the way. She attentively listened, commenting from time to time. I could tell the Lord was answering the prayers of many who knew about this encounter, for He had prepared her heart for the gospel.

She was so polite and receptive, I could not help but wonder why she would not talk to her Mama, but she would not. So, I was privileged to lead her to Christ. She willingly and knowingly opened her life to the Lord. The Lord God was obviously working in her life and she responded in faith. She asked a few questions and then was ready to do business with God. She prayed with me and opened her heart to the Savior, confessing that He was her Lord, expressing her belief in His resurrection, and repenting of her sins. She gently wept as she was gloriously saved. I gave her a New Testament and showed her where to read. I prayed with her for her healing and for her growth in the Lord.

When I returned to the ICU waiting area, Clara was overjoyed to hear the good news of her daughter's salvation. Sharon was also thrilled when I called her as I drove away from the hospital. God continued to work in Betty's life, for her health improved and she was able to return home. Sharon said she could really see a difference in her sister, though her husband gave her a hard time for desiring to live a sanctified life. He was not a believer and was not interested in talking about it.

Many months passed, when Sharon received a call that her sister was in critical condition in the hospital because of an accident in her home. Oddly, she had fallen and hit her head on a coffee table and was knocked out. When I arrived at the ICU, just a few rooms away from where she was saved, Sharon, Clara, Betty's husband, and Sharon's pastor were there. Soon, they would take her off the ventilator and expected her to die. Brother Steve, Sharon's pastor, and I ministered to the family, preparing them for what was to come. He, like me had faced death with church members before.

Eventually, the medical professionals removed Betty from the ventilator. We all expected that she would slowly die, but she did not. Though unconscious, she held on for four hours and eventually slowly stopped breathing and awoke in the presence of her Savior.

At the funeral, Brother Steve was able to share about Betty's faith in Jesus and that those present must also be prepared for when their times came. The family grieved deeply, yet not without hope, for Clara and Sharon, Sharon's husband, and others knew that she was prepared. They all knew that Betty, though she would not talk to her mother about salvation, was saved at last.

Chapter Eleven: Debbie: Surprised by Death

Near Large Suburban Church was a neighborhood of renters: homes, duplexes, and mobile homes, all owned by one family. This family attended our church occasionally and allowed us to minister to families and individuals in that neighborhood. We visited there often, taking food to needy families, picking up children and youth in our church vans for services, and often having services there. Our church staff and members also visited the residents when they were hospitalized.

The neighborhood had a common area for picnics and family gatherings, large enough for many people. Several times a year, we served food and presented music to let the people know we cared about them. I once heard a pastor say to me referring to lost people near the church he served, “They know where we are. If they want to come here, they can. That’s it.” I am so glad that Jesus went where sinners were and sent His disciples out. Jesus did not set up shop in Jerusalem and wait for people to come to Him. He went where they were.

One scorching hot summer day, we had an outreach meeting in the neighborhood. I remember wanting to stick my head in the melting ice water in the soft drink cooler. We cooked hamburgers and hotdogs and served the residents, adding to the heat. Many showed up, some for the food, others for the fellowship, and some just wondering what we were doing there.

Our choir sang some great songs about the cross and then I preached an encouraging word, including the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our church people brought face painting, bean bag toss, and many other games for children. People were enjoying the day as we were winding down our outreach effort. One of the residents, Dianne came up to me and asked if we could talk. I had seen her at other events and a few times at our church.

Dianne was so serious as she told me she was ready to be saved. She told me she had joined a church when she was teenager, but she knew then it was not genuine. She told me she joined to be

near her friends and a certain boy she liked. Now, however, she realized that she was lost. Her life had not gone the way she planned, and she was ready to get right with God. As people walked by us, as children played and adults talked, I shared with Dianne the love of God and His offer of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. She knew some of the scriptures, but that day she met their Author, Jesus Christ. She prayed with deep emotions as she repented, confessed, and received the Lord Jesus, committing her life to Him. We discussed when she would be baptized and I asked her to share her decision with others, letting others know about her decision. She immediately told people from the neighborhood and from our church about her decision.

Dianne was baptized in a few weeks and showed with her presence and determination that her decision was genuine. She began to grow in the Lord, sharing Christ with others and helping in our ministries. She became part of Large Suburban Church, and was there for most services and became involved in some mission work.

From her appearance, I suspected that Dianne was in her forty's, so I was shocked when I received word that she had died suddenly of a heart attack, only about four months after she was saved. The family asked me to preach her funeral, so I prayed and prepared. Many people were at the funeral home for the service. Some I recognized and many I did not. Quite a few from our church family came.

I shared at her funeral how Dianne had recently given her heart to Jesus, encouraging everyone there to be certain of their salvation, for their time would come as well. Through all the tears and mourning, many heard the gospel because of her decision. One of my seminary professors said that most people live within private walls, only allowing others in when there is a crisis, such as a funeral. I prayed that while the people there were grieving, they would open their hearts and lower their walls enough to listen to the gospel.

I was grateful that the church members had enough compassion for people they did not even know to go share with them the good news of Jesus. Some led weekly bible studies there. Many members were involved in that specific effort to reach the neighborhood. Some fixed food, played with children, helped set up tables, prepared and served food, and sang in our choir for that event. None of us knew it at the time, but because of those giving folks, Dianne was saved at last.

Chapter Twelve: Freddie tries to take his own life

Large Suburban church was situated on a busy highway. Next door a couple lived in a small home, and on the other side of them lived two church members. One member lived in a home with his wife. The other member and his wife lived in a motorhome. They traveled a bit and had a small track of land where they stayed when not traveling. The two men were friends and one day were talking in one front yard. They looked over toward the small house and saw a disturbing scene.

Someone had parked a van, attached a hose to the exhaust, and ran it into the van window. The van was filling with deadly smoke. The two men hurried and took the man out of the van, called 911, and stayed with him until the ambulance arrived. I heard almost immediately about the event. The man in the van, Freddie and his wife were having major trouble and he was ready to give up. He had some guns in his house, and I was glad he did not choose that method in his attempt.

In our state as in many, if one attempts suicide, he or she must remain in psychiatric care for a certain number of days after medical treatments. Freddie had no permanent damage from his attempted suicide. I knew I needed to talk to him about Jesus, so I went to the facility where he was and asked permission to speak with him. The people in charge of the psych unit told me when I could see him, which was the next day. I prayed about my visit, asking the Lord to prepare Freddie's heart for the gospel message.

The next day I spoke to Freddie. I had met him before, for he was the piano tuner for all our church pianos. He was a gifted musician, playing both the piano and the guitar at the professional level of skill. In fact, he often played guitar with a local symphony. With all his skill and abilities, his life was empty without Jesus.

After greetings, I asked him if I could share with him what he was missing in his life. He enthusiastically agreed. I had a New Testament, which I knew I could not leave with him, though I told him I would get him a bible after his mandatory time in observation. God had truly prepared his

heart, for as I shared the good news he was smiling and ready. I told about our sin separating us from God, which he agreed (Romans 3:23). I shared scriptures about our condition and how God loved us even though we are sinners (Romans 5:8). I showed him text from Ephesians about how we cannot save ourselves (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Freddie's response surprised me, for he seemed genuinely excited to hear the gospel. I expected some resistance, though I had asked the Lord to prepare Freddie's heart. God did so and more. Freddie listened intently and readily admitted his need for Jesus. I felt like a lifeguard throwing a lifesaver to a drowning man who reached for it eagerly. He opened his life to the word of God.

When I asked Freddie if he wished to repent, give his heart to Jesus, confess Jesus as his savior, and ask Jesus into his heart, he smiled and said he did. We prayed together and he emotionally asked for God's great gift of salvation. He told the Lord that he turned from his sins and turned to Jesus, that he was willing to confess Him before others, he believed Jesus died on the cross and rose again, and that he believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

After we prayed, I asked him if he genuinely repented and called on the Lord. He assured me that he sincerely prayed and that he knew this was what he needed. Though we did not talk about it due to time restrictions, I believed that he had been exposed to the gospel early in his life. I spoke with him about the importance of reading and studying God's word, of being an active part of a vibrant body of Christ, and how prayer will lead him. I told Freddie about how the Lord put His Holy Spirit within him when he opened himself to the Lord, and that this sealed him until the day of redemption.

After I left Freddie, I continued to pray for him that God would speak to him in his isolation. The next week he came home and I met with him again. Freddie told me that he and his wife had gotten together and talk things out and then his marriage was improving rapidly. His wife was

originally from a small community 30 miles away and they began to go back to that church where she was a member. Freddie was baptized later that month. He still tuned the piano at the church and so I would see him regularly and he obviously wasn't entirely different person. Every time I was with Freddie, I saw a living representation of II Corinthians 5:17 that reads, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new." Freddie was a new man in Christ. He and his wife eventually moved back to that community and so I saw him less frequently, since the pianos were tuned about once every six months.

Several years later I was in a local restaurant and saw Freddie. He smiled when he told me that he had stomach cancer. I have seen that look of peace in many believers even though they had received bad news. Freddie was not only prepared to die; in Christ he was prepared to live. Not even terminal cancer could steal in Jesus. After chemotherapy and a few remissions, Freddie died from stomach cancer. I heard that his funeral was a genuine celebration. When I first met Freddie, I had no idea how long he would live. I rejoiced that his suicide attempt failed, thanks to the quick thinking of two men who are both now in heaven. Freddie's life changed, though he knew not how much time he had left to live. Thankfully, he was saved at last.

Chapter Thirteen: Professor Nelson: It Is Never Too Late

I am originally from a city about an hour and a half away from Capitol City. I had not lived there since the early 1970's. My family lives there and I often meet people from that area. One day, I received an email from Virginia, a friend of my mother. Virginia lived in my hometown and was concerned about her aged uncle in our area. In fact, Professor C.O. Nelson lived about five miles from Large Suburban Church. Virginia asked if I would call her to talk about her uncle. I called her immediately.

Virginia told me that her ninety-eight-year-old uncle was a retired college professor of mathematics. He was not saved. She also told me he did not like preachers. Having been through that a few times, I smiled as she told me that. She also said we could not mention church. I had the feeling she was tying our hands. She explained that his wife had died six months ago at a hospital in our area that had the same name as our church denomination. He was also angry at God, having blamed Him for the long illness and her death from Alzheimer's. Because of some problems, he was angry at that hospital, not for any bad treatment of his wife, but because of some billing issues. So, we could not talk about church or name our denomination, and he would not talk to a preacher.

I knew immediately what to do. I sent Ray² to talk to him. You have not met Ray yet, but he was involved in almost every evangelistic effort at Large Suburban Church. Ray was also a retired college professor. I called Ray and asked if he would go visit Professor Nelson. He was intrigued. "I cannot talk about the church, and you cannot go with me. I'm in," he said smiling.

Ray began to reach out to Dr. Nelson, who was something of a recluse. Ray and a young man from our church visited him the first time at his home. His grandnephew lived with him and

² Ray is his real name, used by permission

ran interference for him, so they had a hard time getting to see him. Ray introduced himself to Dr. Nelson, and Ray asked if he could talk to him. He said no. Ray left disappointed.

Ray asked me the next day what to do, so I suggested we just pray and ask the Lord to set this up. For the next six months, Ray visited a few times with the professor. C.O. was leery of strangers at his door, so he spoke with Ray cautiously, never inviting Ray inside. Yet, Ray persisted, letting him know that Ray was a retired professor. I drove there once with Ray to see him, but he was not home. Virginia and her family prayed for C.O., hoping he would be saved so late in life.

Some months later, Dr. Nelson had to move into an assisted-living home, so Ray was excited. He felt C.O. would have to talk to him there. Ray began to visit him from time to time and build a relationship. Dr. Nelson loosened up a bit, talking to Ray about academia and life. Whenever Ray began to discuss the bible, Dr. Nelson politely changed the subject or launched into a story about a dog in his neighborhood years before. Ray continued to pray and build the relationship. I was certain that C.O. would be saved soon, but I had no idea of what God would do to reach this soon-to-be 99-year-old man.

The assisted-living home was near the Large Suburban Church. Each resident had their own apartment, with nurses and helpers nearby 24-hours a day. Residents could keep pets there, but the pets were not allowed to roam freely. Still, often you would see someone walking their dog outside or engaging their pet in the common area.

Ray visited Dr. Nelson several times there. C.O. seemed open a little to the things of the Lord. With much prayer and perseverance, the Lord showed up and showed out. One evening Ray and a young man from the church visited Dr. Nelson. Ray eventually got to the gospel and Dr. Nelson again talked about a dog. He sadly told how a dog near his home was getting into the trash and being a nuisance. The young grandnephew who came around from time to time, asked C.O. if

he should take care of the dog. C.O. said yes, and the young man put poison out for the dog, who ate it and died.

Dr. Nelson was grieved over what he had done and asked Ray if God could forgive what he had done. At that exact moment, before Ray could answer, two unaccompanied dogs walked into the room, pranced right up to Dr. Nelson, and began to lick his hands and love on him. Surprised, Ray said, "There's your answer, Dr. Nelson." C.O. laughed and opened up. Ray told him about the forgiveness of Jesus and how God loved him despite his sins. Dr. Nelson smiled and was ready to be saved.

Ray prayed with him and C.O. Nelson gave his heart to Jesus. The assisted-living home was jumping that night as they celebrated. Virginia was filled with joy. All who heard rejoiced. Three months later, Dr. Nelson turned 99 years old. Virginia said that at his birthday party, he was talking about the Lord and sharing his decision. Within three more months, Dr. C.O. Nelson entered glory. God kept him alive for that moment. He used a repentant college professor and a few dogs to make sure that this old man was saved at last.

Conclusion: The Poacher: Who Isn't Terminal?

In late 2000, I was called to serve as the pastor of the Large Suburban church on the outskirts of Capitol City. I had attended Clarke Jr. College in the early 1970's with the sister of Barbara,³ a member of Large Suburban church. The first month I was there, Barbara fell on her front step and broke an ankle. I visited her in the hospital the next day and I met her husband, Ray. He and I became instant friends.

Ray was a Christian but was away from the Lord. When he was a young man, he felt the Lord had called him to preach. After college, he attended the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in preparation and served as a pastor as well. That church treated him badly, and a nearby church fired a colleague of his for no reason. Ray walked away from that calling and returned to get a master's degree in English. He taught English in colleges for decades, until he retired. He later told me he continued to read his Bible but had little time for any church.

Barbara was in a wheelchair for months, so Ray brought her to church every Sunday morning. The Lord began to speak to Ray and it showed. I invited Ray for lunch one day and we talked at length, mainly about his in-laws, since I knew them years ago. He told me about his bad experience as a young pastor. I knew the Lord had much for Ray to do, and soon he would know it as well.

After a month or so of pushing the wheelchair to church Sunday mornings, Ray suggested to his wife that they attend our Sunday night service, and they did. When Barbara could walk on her own, Ray continued to attend. His contagious smile brightened the back-left part of the sanctuary. Ray was getting right with God and his face showed it.

³ Barbara, Ray, and Kayleigh are their actual names, used with the family's permission

That year, we began a witness training program called FAITH Evangelism. Mike, our Minister of Music and I attended the required trainings to participate, then we trained willing church members on how to witness using the FAITH mnemonic witnessing tool. Ray called and asked to go to lunch one day. As we were driving to Sonny's nearby, Ray told me three reasons why he should not get involved. He obviously wanted me to counter each reason, which I did.

First, he said he was too old. I told him there were many old and retired people with whom we needed to share Christ. Ray agreed with that. Second, he told me he had heart problems and was unsure of his ability to participate. I reminded him that Moses was 80 years old when God called him, and that God was in charge of Ray's heart. He agreed. Third, Ray wasn't sure he could commit to once-a-week training and witnessing. I asked him what he was doing that was this important. He said he would be there for the witnessing training. That was one year after Ray returned to church.

Ray was a voracious learner and was a natural at sharing his faith and the good news about Jesus. After a few visits watching me share, Ray was ready. His first experience was leading his granddaughter, Kayleigh to Christ. I can still see the scene in my mind as she listened so attentively to her grandfather with her parents and me watching. He gently shared from God's word how Jesus died for her and rose again. He told her that when he was young, his mother told him about Jesus and how she read John 3:16 to him and put his name in it. "For God so loved Ray that He gave his only begotten son, that if Ray...." He read the same verse inserting Kayleigh's name.

Kayleigh quietly prayed to open her heart to Jesus when Ray asked her if she was ready. Ray's son and daughter-in-law were thrilled, and all of us wept with joy at the rebirth of this sweet girl.

From that moment on, Ray got busy sharing the gospel, and not just on our Monday night witness training, but on his own. He often asked me to pray for this person or that with whom he had shared his faith. A few months later when we offered another round of witness training at our

church, Ray was one of the leaders. He then trained others to share their faith and the good news of Jesus.

A few years later in 2004, Ray traveled to Romania on a medical mission trip. For five days, he sat and shared the gospel with the poor Romanians while they waited to see our doctors. Hundreds prayed to receive Christ, professed Him as their Lord, and expressed their belief in the resurrection. Ray made this arduous journey many times, often three times a year.

His heart condition required that Ray must stay in the hotel and recuperate the day after the long plane ride, while the rest of us became tourists in beautiful Romania. He would also stay in the hotel for a day of rest before we returned to the States while we enjoyed a free day again as tourists. He also spent several days at home resting, so the ten-day trip was fourteen or fifteen days long for him as he recovered. Still, he made that journey seventeen times. For a decade, Ray traveled to Romania, often several times a year to share the gospel. He loved the joy of sharing the good news.

In 2008, Ray and Barbara joined many others on a trip to the Holy Land, including Petra in Jordan. Ray and Barbara moved slowly, because of his heart and her ankle, and stayed on the bus for a few stops, but had the time of their lives. When Ray was a young man, he was in excellent shape. He ran marathons and was a football referee on the college level. When I thought about Ray, I saw the embodiment of 2 Corinthians 4:16, “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.”

Ray loved to hunt, and previously committed much of his time to this hobby. After he began to witness, his hunting time decreased. Still, he loved getting outdoors and all that the hunting trip entailed. One day, the owner of the land where Ray hunted offered him a deal. In exchange for watching the property, keeping gates locked, etc., Ray did not have to pay a yearly hunting lease.

One day, Ray caught a poacher on the hunting lease and turned him in. The owner brought charges against the man and Ray had to go to court as a witness. He later told me he wished this had

not happened, but he knew he had to do the right thing. The poacher was a man who obviously did not earn much money. This broke Ray's heart, for he was truly a humble and gentle man.

Ray told me what happened next. The poacher was fined \$86, so Ray found his home from the court records and put a fifty-dollar bill, a twenty, a ten, a five, and a one-dollar bill in his mail box in an envelope with no return address or identification.

A few days later, Ray knocked on the man's door. The astonished man recognized him and said, "Say, I know who you are. Aren't you the man from the trial? Were you the one who put the money in my mailbox?" He was puzzled.

Ray answered that he did. The man wanted to know why, and Ray said, "I paid your fine so that I can tell you about the man who paid mine." Ray had his attention. The man's son was watching a TV show and it was loud, so Ray asked him to come and sit in Ray's truck to talk. He reluctantly agreed and they went to the truck.

In his truck, Ray shared with the poacher the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ, how He died and rose again, offering us all eternal life. The man wept from conviction as Ray shared the gospel. As I taught Ray, as I was taught, Ray prayed before and after witnessing, inviting the Holy Spirit to go ahead of us and after us as we obediently witnessed and that the listeners would be attentive and under conviction. This man was ready when Ray asked him if he wanted to be saved.

In the quiet of the front seat of that truck, the man gave his heart and committed his life to Jesus. The man who paid for his fine told him about Jesus who paid his fine. Then the man said, "Could we go inside and tell my son what you just told me?" Ray of course said yes. They went inside and turned off the TV. Ray shared the gospel and the teenager also was saved. The man lived miles away from Ray, so Ray told him to go to a local church and tell the pastor that he and his son were saved.

Ray couldn't stop laughing and grinning when he told me this story. He was thrilled to tell

the good news. I was thrilled to hear it. Often pastors want to be the main soul-winner in the church they serve. Not me. I prayed for a dozen like Ray and rejoiced at how the Lord used Ray to see many saved, from Romania, to prisons, to relatives, to neighbors, and people God put in his path.

Sadly, Ray was killed in an automobile accident in 2015. We all grieved but rejoiced in the last fifteen years of his life, as he told thousands the good news about Jesus Christ.

The last I heard, the former poacher and his family were serving the Lord in that local church and is still alive. “That doesn’t fit the theme of this book,” you might say. “I thought this was about people who were saved at last, near the end of their lives.” That is true, but when Ray shared the gospel with this man, none of us knew how long he would live. None of us know when our neighbors will die, or our postman, our bankers, our grocer, or our family members. Many of these in this book who were saved, appeared to be nowhere near death, yet they died suddenly, as Ray did.

Not everyone gets time in a hospital to repent and be saved, so share the gospel as if everyone is close to facing judgment, for they all are. The words in this book will be here for many years, but those reading this will die one by one. Since we do not know when anyone will die or when Jesus will return, let us share the good news of Jesus with them all. Whether just before their death, or possibly decades before like Ray’s granddaughter, in light of eternity, all believers are saved at last.