

“Nothing Left For You To Do”

(A story from the Annals of the Reformation—Updated language for today)

A young man in Europe was heard preaching the Gospel to a bookseller so clearly and earnestly that the bookseller followed him out and asked where he had learned the Gospel so fully and plainly. The young man replied, “I learned it in the very last place you would expect,” and then he told his story.

Though he called himself a Catholic, he had no real religion and spent his time pleasing himself. He became so notoriously wicked that even his sinful companions wouldn't dare to sin as boldly as he did. Yet, it was this extraordinary wickedness that God used to awaken his conscience.

One day, he thought, “It may be true that there is eternal punishment for sinners.” He had heard of Judgment and the Lake of Fire and thought, “If anyone is to be there, it must be me; for I have never seen or heard anyone who has sinned as I have.” Still young, he despaired, thinking of how sinners might be saved by entering a monastery and doing penance. He hoped that by doing more penance than anyone before, he might escape eternal punishment and perhaps spend some time in purgatory instead.

He heard of the La Trappe Monastery in Sicily, known for its severe rules. The monks woke at midnight for chapel services, worked hard in the fields, endured harsh weather, and slept on knotted ropes. Hearing of such a cloister filled him with joy, and he decided to offer himself to the monks. Poor as he was, he traveled hundreds of miles on foot.

Finally, he crossed the Straits of Messina and reached the old monastery with its gloomy walls. Exhausted, he rang the rear gate bell. An old monk, barely able to move, opened the gate and asked what he wanted. “I want to be saved,” the young man replied. The old monk kindly led him into a small room near the gate.

“Now tell me what you mean,” said the old man. “I’d like to hear your story.”

The young man told his sad tale, concluding, “I have been a greater sinner than anyone I’ve ever heard of. I don’t think I can be saved. But I’m willing to do anything if it gives me a faint hope of escaping eternal punishment. I’ll spend the rest of my life in penance, and the harder it is, the more thankful I’ll be. Just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it gladly.”

“If you will do what I tell you,” replied the old monk, “you will go back to Germany. There has been One who has done the whole work in your place before you came, and He has finished it. He did it instead of you, so there is nothing left for you to do. It is all done.”

The young man was puzzled. “Who has done it?” he asked.

“Have you ever heard of the Lord Jesus Christ?” asked the old man.

“Yes, of course, I have heard of Him.”

“Do you know where He is?” continued the aged man.

“Yes, He is in heaven,” replied the young man.

“But do you know why He is in Heaven?” asked the old monk, looking earnestly into his face.

“No, except that He is always in Heaven.”

“He was not always in Heaven,” said the old man. “He came down here to do the work that you want to do yourself; He came down to bear the punishment for your sin. He is in Heaven now because the work is done. If it were not so, He would still be here, for He came to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. If anything remained to be done, He would still be here, for He undertook to do the whole work Himself, and He has gone back to Heaven because He has done it. Do you know what He said upon the Cross, ‘It is finished.’”

The young man asked, “What is finished?”

The reply came, “The work you want to begin. If you want to add the crowning sin to your wicked life and do something worse than you have done before, you may stay here and cast contempt upon the blessed, perfect work of the Son of God. You would be saying that Christ has not done enough and that you must add to the work He declared to be finished. It may seem strange that I stay here where Christ is insulted, but I am very old and can only walk to the gate. I cannot get away, so I must stay here until the Lord calls me. But you can go, and I entreat you to go back to your friends and tell them all that the Lord has done for you. You may stay here three days, and I will tell you all I can about the Lord Jesus Christ, and then you must go.”

“And so,” said the young man, “I stayed there for three days, and the old man told me much more about the work of the Lord Jesus. He told me not only what His death had done for me but also how He had risen again to give me eternal life and how He had won for me a place in heaven above the angels, where He is waiting for me and all who believe in Him. I returned to Germany, and from that day to this, I have told anyone who will listen about the perfect work of Christ.”