

Almost Persuaded

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All of us, I'm sure, remember a time when we almost did something but were too late. Perhaps you wanted to go to get something that was on sale but by the time you made up your mind to buy it, it was gone. Maybe you had an appointment that you wanted to keep but you arrived there too late. But we always console ourselves with the thought, "Well, there will be other sales," or we can reschedule our appointments. But the hardest losses in the stakes are those that we can't make up, the nagging what-ifs that can plague us sometimes for weeks or for months or for our whole lifetime. But what is all that compared to those who have heard the gospel perhaps all their lives, were deeply moved by the gospel at different times, who resolved in their mind and heart to embrace the gospel, to be more serious, but only to allow those impressions to pass, to remain, as it were, in their natural indifference until finally death overtakes them. I hope there is no one here that is in that condition, who at the end of your lives it will be said at your funeral, "This person almost entered the kingdom of heaven." We simply, congregation, cannot afford to die with the words "if only" on our lips. We cannot afford to live not being sure of our eternal end being right. We have to be convicted that it is God-dishonoring to have the gospel brought to us and yet to live as if we are not thoroughly convinced of the truth of it.

Our text for this morning is Acts 26:27-30.

27 King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.
28 Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a
Christian. 29 And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also
all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am,
except these bonds. 30 And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up,
and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them:

Our theme for this morning is simply the word "Almost." In the first place, we see in this text a persuasive sermon; in the second place, an almost persuaded hearer; and in the third place, a persevering servant and a persevering sinner. Our theme is "Almost": a persuasive sermon, an almost persuaded hearer, and a persevering servant and sinner.

By the time Acts 26 comes, then we see that Paul is almost done with his labors on earth. He had been at Jerusalem when a mob incited from some of the Jews in Asia had come

and almost killed him outside of the temple, and in God's providence, Roman soldiers came in and rescued him, and yet after that rescue, Paul languished for almost two years under the custody of the corrupt governor Felix. Finally Felix was replaced by Festus. Festus, boys and girls, was also a man of very corrupt principles. He was a naughty man and he thought to please the Jews by having Paul tried before the Jewish leaders contrary to Roman law at Jerusalem, and it was at that point that Paul appealed to Caesar, in other words, children, he wanted to be heard by a higher court of law, to stand before Caesar, the emperor himself, and to so have his case tried there. Because of his appeal to Caesar, Paul was kept in custody by Festus until the next opportunity for a ship to sail and to take him to Rome. Meanwhile, King Agrippa and his wife Bernice had come to visit Festus, and it was during their stay that the three of them, Festus, Agrippa and his wife, one day sat down to hear Paul's defense, to hear him speak about his convictions about his thoughts and his religion, but a most remarkable thing happened when they came together: the prisoner, Paul, by means of the preaching of the word of God assumed for those few moments the role of the authority in the room, and those who were the king and the wife and the governor for those few moments became the defendants who stood on trial before God and his word.

Let's consider that in our first thought: a persuasive sermon. Agrippa begins in chapter 26 by allowing Paul to speak in his own defense. Paul was delighted to be able to do so because he knew that King Agrippa was a man who was very acquainted with the Jewish religion, with the Old Testament prophets, with the word of God in the Old Testament. So Paul went on to speak about his past, living as he did as a Pharisee, and then saying how now he was judged specifically for the hope that he had in the Old Testament promises and prophecies of God's word. Verse 8 indicates he was referring particularly to the prophecies about Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and then in verses 12 and following, he tells the story of his conversion as he was traveling on his way to Damascus and how the Jews turned against him because of that change, because of his preaching about Christ and about the ways of God, and how they sought to kill him. But you'll notice, congregation, that at key places throughout his preaching before these three, he made sure to include the gospel as well as personal remarks, appeals directly to them. For example in verse 8, he questions Agrippa, "Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?" Then in verses 22 and 23, "Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come."

Now at one point, boys and girls, Festus, who was more ignorant of the ways and of the word of God, thought perhaps to get a laugh out of his two guests and he says to Paul in a loud voice, verse 24, "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad." In other words, "Paul, your studies have driven you to insanity, to speak foolishness." Festus thought this was all very humorous and then with the utmost seriousness, without blinking so much as an eye, Paul turns and says that the things that he spoke were the truth and that King Agrippa knew it, that the things which he was speaking were in perfect harmony with the word of God. And then in a daring application in verses 26 and 27, Paul appeals directly to the conscience of Agrippa, demanding, as it were, a response from him to the preaching. He says, "For the king knoweth of these things, before whom

also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest."

So in a moment, the defendant became the prosecutor, as it were, the word of God became the witness, and Agrippa and Bernice and Festus were now summoned to give their answer to the charges. But this is history, congregation. This happened a long time ago in a faraway place, but the question this morning is: has this or something like this ever happened to you? Perhaps you came sometime to church just to hear a sermon, maybe some of you are here just to fill up your weekly allotted time, your obligation to show up in church, and then before you realized it, your conscience stood before the word of God as condemned, before you realized it, you stood before God as judge. Has it ever happened that as you were listening to the voice of a man preaching, that suddenly or gradually that voice became the very voice of God with all its authority and majesty. The question to you and to me: believest thou the prophets? Believest thou, you, the gospel? Believest thou the Lord Jesus Christ himself as he addresses you Sunday after Sunday? How many of us, congregation, simply sit in church Sunday after Sunday utterly bored with the things we hear, bored with the things of life and of death and of eternity? Many of us, perhaps, even now actively resisting what we hear, not wanting our lives to be touched by the forceful persuasive word of God?

I remember many years ago when I was first changed. I tried to persuade someone I was going to college with, this young lady, about the Christian religion. She was a Jew and I remember she utterly refused to listen to taped sermons that I had been listening to, and the reason was she did not want to be changed, in the same way, she had too much to lose. As far as I know, to this day she never was or became a believer. But the question is what about you? You are not like Festus who evidently knew almost nothing about the Jewish or Christian religion. You are not like Agrippa who only knew the Old Testament prophets and scriptures and things of that nature. You are not like Agrippa in another sense, that only now for the first time was he confronted by the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel. Most of you were brought up under the word of God perhaps your whole life. I can't even begin to calculate the number of sermons, at least 100 per year for how many years?

Paul was persuaded, verse 27, that Agrippa believed the prophets but he was not sure that Agrippa savingly embraced the gospel and he was pressing that point home on Agrippa's conscience. And it's not my place nor the place of the elders or deacons to judge you whether you are such a person, but it would be dreadful, wouldn't it, if some of you who perhaps made a profession of some sort, some kind of confession of faith or of truth would suddenly die and never have embraced the Lord Jesus by faith personally. It would be most dreadful of those of you who have made a profession to being a Christian would die and realize suddenly that it was almost so, that you really were basing your hope of salvation on some kind of experience or convictions or guilty conscience or conscience pangs, or hopes or wishes, and not on the solid rock.

I know that all of you probably agree in some general way with the word of God with the things you hear Sunday after Sunday, but that wasn't good enough for Paul with regard to Agrippa. Paul was aiming at nothing short of Agrippa's salvation. Now Paul was glad that Agrippa had at least a foundation of religion. He wasn't afraid to challenge this man's thinking, to challenge even the people under whose authority he was bound. Christ must suffer according to the prophets, he preached, he would rise again as the scriptures prophesied, he would show his light to the Gentiles. Paul knew this. Paul preached this. Paul believed this.

Boys and girls, what was Agrippa's response? What did he say? That's our second thought: an almost persuaded hearer. Paul says, "I speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest." In other words, "Agrippa, can't you see the connection between the Old Testament prophecies and the living New Testament gospel of which those prophecies spake?" Agrippa's answer was, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

Now we can't know certainly why Agrippa rejected the preaching of Paul, and make no mistake about it, it was a rejection outright. Don't be fooled by the "almost." We don't know why exactly he rejected Paul's preaching but we know that it wasn't because Paul was preaching falsehoods, and we know it wasn't because of a lack of proof and of evidence from the scriptures, and we know it wasn't because Paul wasn't sincerely interested in Agrippa's salvation. I think we all can guess why he rejected the gospel. Agrippa concluded, perhaps, that he had too much to lose. Perhaps he was inhibited by the embarrassment that he would feel in front of his prestigious friends. Perhaps he was ignorant of what Paul preached. I don't think so. But whatever the reason, whatever your reason whether it's peer pressure, whether it's liking the life that you're now in, comfortable, happy to do your duty as a nominal Christian but not willing perhaps to have your entire life turned upside down by the gospel, whatever the reason was for Agrippa, the bottom line was he was not persuaded. He remained an unbeliever. His eyes remained closed to spiritual things. His heart remained hardened.

When Agrippa said, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian," he was not saying that if Paul would just have preached a little longer, had been a little bit more loquacious or perhaps using a bit finer descriptions or more scripture texts perhaps to illustrate his points, maybe give his appeal a little more rhetorical flair, that somehow if he had only persisted that would have pushed Agrippa over the top, as it were, and become persuaded. Make no mistake about it, Agrippa was as far from eternal life as he ever had been. His heart, after all, was set on his pleasures, on his prestige, and on his sins.

Almost persuaded in the final judgment of God is not persuaded. In fact, congregation, and it's not easy for me to say this, almost persuaded is worse than never having heard the gospel at all. Mark 6:11 Jesus warns, "whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city." You could almost picture in Jesus' day as the disciples were

sent out to preach, they would go to this town and to that village and perhaps there were many people there who said, "Go away! We don't want to hear you!" And then the apostle would shake his garment like this and walk away never to preach the gospel again. Could you imagine if God so dealt with you, that if after hearing the gospel once and you rejecting it, that God would leave you entirely over to the hardness of your heart permanently and irrevocably?

In John 15:22-24 Jesus adds, "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father." All of you have seen the works of God that Jesus is describing here. All of you know perhaps of a young teenager or perhaps of someone elderly whose life has been utterly transformed by the word and Spirit of God. You know such people. You see them in your midst. You are convinced that the Spirit does such things in real lives and Jesus said, "If I hadn't done such works, it had been different," but he says to you, "You have seen, you have heard and you have hated both me and my Father."

You see, boys and girls, it was far worse for Agrippa now that he heard the compelling voice of the gospel through Paul, that he would remain unbelieving toward it. If the gospel is not persuasive to us, then the reason is because our ears are open to other voices and we listen to them. In other words, if we're not persuaded by the gospel, what will persuade you? What else should God bring to you? What greater, more authoritative, directly applicable message can God bring than to speak to you about the Son of God come into this world to save sinners? What else do you want to hear? What else would be persuasive? What more could God do for his vine than he has done?

You see, congregation, the story of Agrippa comes very close to us even though it happened a long time ago and in a faraway place. He was not one of the ignorant heathen who was confused when it comes to the scriptures. Paul told us that Agrippa was familiar with the word of God but Agrippa is telling Paul that he has heard the truth, that he has weighed the cost, that he has purposed in his heart to remain in his life of sin and ease. This man made exactly the opposite choice that Moses by the grace of God made in his time, who chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. And why? Because he esteemed the riches and the reproach of Christ greater than the treasures in Egypt. In other words, for Agrippa it was a conscious decision to remain an unbeliever. The same is true about you.

In Luke 9:50 Jesus warns us that we are either for him or we are against him. You can't remain neutral under the preaching of the gospel. You are either a friend of God by faith or you're an enemy of God says Jesus. We either fall in with the gospel by means of the grace of faith, or we fall away from it by our persistent unbelief.

Proverbs 1:24-26 perhaps says it the clearest, "Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh." You see, congregation, God will not be ignored. He will not be

mocked. God did not send his Son Jesus to die on the cross just so wretched sinners like we are can yawn when we hear the gospel preached.

Our problem is we are so out-of-touch with God by nature, who he really is, that we tend to think of the gospel as just some other advertisement like the many that we hear and received. And I hate to say it but there are several perhaps in this congregation consider the scriptures, the preaching of the word as much as you consider the junk mail that comes in your mailbox each day, quickly reviewed then easily discarded, like some telephone marketer who bothers us perhaps for a moment but then we're soon rid of him and his message. Does that describe how you come to church each Sunday? Does that describe what you do with the messages you hear?

When Agrippa said, "Thou almost persuadest me to be a Christian," he might as well have said, "Nice try, Paul, but I'm not interested." Or ultimately, "Go away, Jesus. I have more delight in my sins than I have in you." And whether you realize it or acknowledge it or not, that is your answer if you are still unconverted. You might listen ever so carefully, you might be ever so earnest in your desire to be saved, you might look so intently upon the preacher as he speaks to you as Paul is speaking forth the words of truth and of soberness, but after all is said and done you consign the precious gospel of Christ to the trash heap of forgotten thoughts like a person flipping through their junk mail, discarded. So you trash each sermon and Bible reading in your forgetfulness, in your indifference, and so many interruptions in your otherwise very important itinerary, and the tragedy is some of you have been almost Christians for years.

But almost persuaded means not persuaded. Almost persuaded means lover of self and a hater of Christ. Almost persuaded means being polite but not contrite. It means listening but not believing. Almost persuaded is like an artificial plant which perhaps looks pretty but is quite dead. Almost persuaded earns us the sentence of Jesus against Judas, "Good were it for that man, that woman, that child, had he never been born."

Paul would not, Paul could not as a faithful servant of God give up on Agrippa even after his almost persuaded answer. We read in verse 29, "I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds." Paul wanted a complete change not only in Agrippa but in all those who heard him speak. "I would to God" means that Paul laid this need, this petition at the feet of God at that very moment. But he says, "not only thou, but also all that hear me this day," he was not content that any, that any should be left behind. "Were almost and altogether such as I am," indicates he would not be satisfied with anything less than sincere heartfelt religion, faith. But then he adds, "except these bonds." Despite his two year imprisonment and his unjust treatment, he wished no ill upon the people to whom he was preaching despite the fact that they were unbelievers and unjust.

God's servant perseveres with Agrippa. How could he give him up? As he wrote to the Corinthians, "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men." And a little later in the same chapter, "for the love of Christ constraineth us." Knowing as Paul did what awaits all those who die in their sins under the preaching of the gospel, knowing as

Paul did the precious love of the Lord Jesus Christ, how could he let Agrippa or Festus or Bernice go? And as he wrote in 2 Thessalonians 1:8, "In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." Dear unbelieving friend, this is your case. How shall you perish in sight of the cross? How can you continue on when you see so many others perhaps right here in this very congregation, in this very room, perhaps in your very home or family fleeing to Christ and finding refuge in him? God comes to you time and again but there will come an end to that. Who can tell how soon death will overtake you and me, and how will death find you? Almost persuaded?

But sadly, congregation, Paul is not the only one who's persistent. Verse 30 reads, "And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them." And boys and girls, the next verse we find the three of them going over to the side of the room and talking among themselves not about the sermon, not about what they heard talked about Paul, or, "What a pity he can't be let free. He seems like a very decent man. Too bad he appealed to Caesar, we could have let him go." I wonder if that's not going to be the scene just a few minutes from now. I've lived here for six years. I remember times hearing sermons that in my mind and conscience shook the very foundations of this building and no sooner do you walk outside of church, you hear about a person's job and about their vacation, and what's new at work or at school, and plans for the week, and let me sit over our cups of coffee at home, we have a nice chat about the sermon for perhaps a second or two, and then it's on to other things. The message of the gospel, the appeal to the conscience, it's all gone.

It's not that they thought ill of Paul. "This man doeth nothing worthy of death or bonds. What a pity we can't free him." And I'm sure that's your attitude too. Nothing personal against the minister, you have no problem with your elders and deacons. That's their job to preach and to warn and to encourage, but you very politely leave all of that behind when you go home. "Too bad I'm not saved. Maybe another time I will be."

Almost. Almost saved is altogether lost. Almost in heaven means altogether in hell. Almost believing means an unbeliever still. Almost converted means unconverted. Almost a Christian means you're a non-Christian. Almost persuaded is not persuaded. Almost a lover of Christ is an enemy of Christ. Almost means too short for eternity. Almost means lost.

Believers in our midst, I haven't hardly said a word to you but what I do want to say is how often, how often do we coddle the almost Christians in our lives? We don't want to offend them. We don't want to turn them off to Christianity. Besides, they're so close to believing. Maybe a few more days, we think, maybe just a few more sermons, maybe in a few weeks they'll come over to faith but the days go by and the weeks go by and we find ourselves going to their funeral home to view their deceased body knowing full well that unless a last minute miracle took place, they are probably at that very moment cursing your name in hell for not speaking to them.

I sometimes think that the almost Christians are the hardest ones of all to deal with. They agree with everything you say. They nod in affirmation when you preach. They even shed tears sometimes and get emotional or moved and they show up to the church functions and they do their very best to be decent and upstanding members of the congregation and they die in their sins and they go straight to hell and they appear before God without righteousness. So you who are an almost Christian, please don't go home, sit with your cup of coffee as usual, and just talk about trivialities. Please don't go to sleep tonight totally unconcerned about eternal things. Don't be polite about religious things for which you have no desire. Do you realize that as you're doing these things there are people gnashing their teeth and writhing in hell because they lived the same way you're living to the very last.

There are no consolation prizes in hell for being almost persuaded. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, who came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." Be not almost but altogether a confessing, repentant, broken sinner. Not almost but altogether a holy, tender-conscienced, saved sinner, believing sinner. Love the Lord Jesus Christ not in pretense but in sincerity. Christ has suffered, died, was the firstborn from the dead and is still giving light to us Gentiles. Follow him as if your whole life depended upon it because it does. Amen.