

ALMOST PERSUADED

"King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. 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." Acts 26:27-29.

This sermon is taken from a dialogue between King Agrippa and the Apostle Paul. In Agrippa we shall see what we are, while in Paul we shall see what we should be. We shall discover that the king was almost persuaded to be a Christian, while the apostle was altogether a Christian. By almost persuaded to be a Christian is meant one who is wavering between Christ and Satan. There is a difference between being almost a Christian and being almost persuaded to be a Christian. One who is almost an artist knows something of painting but one who is almost persuaded to be an artist may not even know the names of all the colors.

Agrippa had some knowledge of Christ. It may have been very superficial, and yet it carried responsibility with it. It had in it some of the prerequisites of salvation had he been willing to be saved. Agrippa was evidently influenced by his companions, especially Bernice who was a wicked person. His manner was plainly not that of an independent, fearless man. His real feeling was concealed.

Agrippa is a representative sinner. He represents multitudes of sinners in every age and land where the gospel is faithfully preached. They attend the services at God's house. They listen attentively to God's message and believe it to be true, and are often impressed by it. They are sometimes deeply moved by the message, and are almost persuaded then and there to surrender, but^a lingering doubt remains. An evil heart suggests delay. Tomorrow will do as well. They are not quite ready. The truth convinces, the Spirit of God convicts and moves, solemn motives plead for immediate decision, but the high resolve is lacking. Alas! it is the bitter experience of millions who have passed beyond the offers of salvation and the opportunities of life.

Everyone who desires to read the biography of a great adventurer should read about Paul. His life abounds in thrills. He experienced numerous hardships and perils. The most remarkable thing about his experiences was the fact that he always managed to bring in a testimony for his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He determined that he would not let an opportunity to tell someone about Christ escape. Paul was truly a great man. He had an intellect that grasped the most sublime truths, a heart that loved God devotedly and bled with compassion for his fellowmen. He lived the Christianity which he preached with his lips. His conduct confirmed the doctrines that his lips declared. He was an excellent proof of the power of Christ to save and to use. Paul did not estimate any man according to his birth, his attire, his position, or his wealth, but according to the actual amount of Christian truth contained in his mind and embodied in his life.

Our scripture lesson presents Paul as he stood before royalty in the capacity of an undaunted and brave prisoner. His hands were chained, but his brave spirit was not. Neither the anathemas of his own countrymen nor the scowl of the world could crush that spirit of his which rose in triumph over all. He was in chains, yet there was no man more free than he. His spirit exulted in a liberty which no despot could injure, nor time destroy.

King Agrippa commanded Paul to speak. He began his wonderful defense and testimony by complimenting Agrippa upon his knowledge concerning the Jews. Then he spoke concerning his life before he had become a Christian. He told about his persecution of the Christians throughout Palestine. In the light of his testimony, there are three things which are worthy of our thoughtful consideration.

I. His Character.

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." What then was Paul? He was a Christian. What is a Christian? A Christian is one who has accepted Jesus Christ as the basis of his faith and the ruler of his life. A Christian is one in whom Christ is formed by the miracle of regeneration, and through whom Christ is manifested before the eyes of the world, and with whom Christ cooperates in the work of winning men, and to whom Christ grants a fellowship in His suffering. Paul accepted the atonement of Christ as the only hope of salvation. He made the will of Christ the rule of his conduct. He cherished the love of Christ as the inspiration of his life. Paul was perfectly satisfied with the choice he had made. He had no misgiving that in his becoming a Christian he had acted wisely. He was happy. He was far more happy in his fetters than any person in the audience to which he was testifying.

One is happy according to the conformity of his will to God's will. Paul was a Christian in the highest, deepest, and broadest meaning of that term. He was a loving and a loyal disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. He could do without a home; he could dispense with the wealth of Festus; he could live without the crown of Agrippa; but, he could not do without Christ. To him Christ was "the hope of glory". Paul never regretted becoming a Christian, nor did he regret his estimate of his heritage. The wealth of God's glory was his, and the home of God's saints was his portion. Such was his character when he stood face to face with Agrippa.

II. His Circumstances.

In his report to Agrippa we find the words, "except these bonds". When he stood before Agrippa he was a prisoner in bonds. He was bound with a chain to the prison of his keeper. He had been apprehended, imprisoned, and arraigned on a charge of sedition. He was defending himself against that charge. Such were his circumstances at the time.

III. His Concern.

"I would to God that all who hear me this day were both almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds." This was not the false wish of a proud, self-righteous Pharisee, but the true wish of a genuine Christian philanthropist. Paul distinguished between what was essential in the Christian and what was merely circumstantial, between what was desirable and what was undesirable, and he was anxious that Agrippa and the others have the essential and desirable, but not the circumstantial and the undesirable. He wanted Agrippa to resemble him in character, but not in circumstances because he was a Christian suffering for the sake of righteousness.

It is quite evident that Paul never regretted becoming a Christian. When he stood before Agrippa he was comparatively an old man. He had been a disciple of Christ for many years. He had passed through much suffering for the sake of Christ. He was then on the brink of the grave for a death of martyrdom was just before him. And yet, he would not have exchanged places with Agrippa because he felt that his position was infinitely preferable to that of the king. He knew that it was far better to have Christ with suffering than to be a king without Christ. Therefore, the best wish which he could breathe for Agrippa was that he might be not only almost persuaded to be a Christian, but altogether a Christian.

It was possible for Agrippa to become a Christian; otherwise, Paul never would have breathed such a wish. What made Paul a Christian would also make Agrippa a Christian. And what was that? It was the grace of God. Paul said, "By the grace of God I am what I am." Christ made Paul what he was; so true, so brave, so noble, and so good; and Christ can make us like him.

Paul made a favorable impression on Agrippa, but his testimony was disdainfully rejected. That sort of thing occurs so frequently. Many are brought to accept the reasonableness of Christianity, and yet they reject Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Why was the half-convinced hearer only almost persuaded? His conduct with Bernice was quite sufficient for his never being altogether persuaded to be a Christian. It is possible that the value of human praise and the fear of human censure prevented him from becoming a Christian. He may have thought that should he become a Christian it would involve a forfeiture of power, of position, and of influence.

Agrippa evidently had some religious knowledge. More than once he had been brought under the power of deep religious convictions. He must have struggled long before or he could not have made the admission which he did. Certainly he did not hesitate to become a Christian on account of any lack of evidence. He was convinced, but not persuaded; his understanding yielded at his discretion, but he secretly rebelled; and this is just the mystery of unbelief.

What was the reason he did not yield entirely to the divine influence now brought to bear upon him, and become a genuine Christian? It was not because the gospel did not contain a sufficient motive to induce him to do so, but because he did not think sufficiently and rightly about it and act accordingly. He was almost at the place where he could receive the forgiveness of sin, but he continued in guilt. Although he was almost out of the mire of sin, he fell back into its depths. He was almost in the arms of Christ, but he continued in the clutches of Satan. He almost reached the mansions on high, but he sank into the depths of hell.

Almost a Christian is the equivalent of not being a Christian. Almost leaves one standing without and causes him to lose all of the inestimable boons of Christianity. When one is only almost persuaded to be a Christian, he misses altogether the blessings which full persuasion would have brought him. What a pity to be so near the prize and yet miss it after all! Surely that was a tragic doom to have only one step between him and life, and that step not taken!

Oh! sadness of all sadnesses -- that 'almost' which never ripened into 'altogether'; to have stood on the brink of the great river of salvation, and yet never to have committed ourselves to its waves; to have seen the King afar off, some faint glimpses of His beauty, and yet never to have come to know Him and to enjoy Him.

The folly of such a condition is appalling. The fact that it is a sin is evident as one realizes it is ineffectual to salvation, it is prejudicial to others, it is a mark of ingratitude of Christ, it deprives of numerous blessings, it brings additional guilt, and it leads to endless regrets.

Those of you who are almost persuaded to become Christians are certainly in a hopeful condition. But you cannot have and enjoy the blessings of salvation by being "almost" persuaded. Your hunger cannot be appeased by almost eating, nor your thirst quenched by almost drinking. Almost spells the difference between peace and wretchedness, Christ and Satan, heaven and hell. Think of the risk that you run by further delay! Think of heaven being opened for the ransomed and the ready,

and you almost at the gate before it shuts! Do not miss your opportunity. Become a Christian now by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. Then come forward and confess Him as your Saviour, while we join in singing the hymn of invitation.