

MISSING THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME

"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.

Paul's preaching in Jerusalem was very straight and right to the point. A riot resulted, and the unregenerated religious group of that day, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, wanted to kill Paul. A guard in the Temple court seized Paul and took him to the Tower of Antonia, and when he learned of the plot to kill the Apostle the centurion said, "Go to Felix," then ruler over Caesarea. At Caesarea Paul was placed in prison.

Two years went by, and later Felix died and Festus was appointed ruler over Caesarea. About the same time Agrippa was appointed the Roman king over several provinces in Palestine. His headquarters were at Jerusalem. Festus thought that he should go and pay his respects to Agrippa. While they were together, he told Agrippa of this pestilent fellow whom he had kept in prison. This aroused the curiosity of Agrippa who said, "Festus, I would also hear the man myself." On the following day, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought into the presence of the dignitaries to answer the charges which had been made against him.

Paul stood before royalty in the capacity of an undaunted and brave prisoner. His hand was chained, but his brave spirit was not. Neither the anathemas of his own countrymen nor the scowl of the world could crush his spirit. His spirit exulted in a liberty which no despot could injure, nor time destroy. When Agrippa gave Paul permission to speak for himself, the Apostle began his masterful defense by complimenting the King and expressing his pleasure at being able to plead his case before one who was so familiar with Jewish history and customs.

Paul then spoke about his own life prior to his dramatic conversion at Damascus. He related what Christ had done for him. He also told how he had been commissioned to go to the Gentiles and to turn men round from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, in order that they might receive the forgiveness of sins.

As Paul waxed eloquent and earnest in his heaven-inspired sermon about the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Christ, he was suddenly interrupted by Festus, who said, "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad." In other words he said, "Paul, education has gone to your head, you are losing your mind!" In reply to an accusation of Festus that he had gone crazy, with admirable self-control Paul made a courteous, earnest and full disavowal of insanity, declaring, "I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness."

Turning directly and dramatically to Agrippa, and addressing him personally, Paul said, "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets?" Then, before Agrippa had time to reply, Paul answered for him, "I know that thou believest." And that was true. Apostate Jew though he was, Agrippa had great respect for the prophets of Israel, and it was plain from his attitude that he was convinced that Paul was correctly interpreting the prophets. Agrippa was seized by the Holy Spirit and carried back over the devious track of his misspent life, piling before him the sins that had characterized his hellbound career. He stood trembling under deep conviction. Agrippa exclaimed, "Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

This statement indicates that Agrippa was under deep and pungent conviction. He, no doubt, felt the awful anguish of a soul alienated from God, and the deep pangs of guilt and remorse that had seized him under the preaching of the gospel by Paul. Everything indicates that Agrippa's utterance was sincere. That he was almost persuaded to be a Christian was the way Paul interpreted his remark.

Paul's power of persuasion was based upon a personal testimony about a personal experience of the birth from above. Paul had experienced saving grace in the salvation of his own soul. The manner of Paul's persuasion was not only based upon his appeal to the Word of God, but he backed it up by a personal testimony. His personal testimony was backed up by a consistent life, a living epistle read and known of all men. Agrippa was almost persuaded to be a Christian, but Paul was altogether a Christian.

Agrippa was a representative sinner. He represents multitudes of sinners in every age and nation where the gospel is preached faithfully. They attend the services at God's house. They listen attentively to God's message and believe it to be true, and are often deeply impressed by it. They are sometimes deeply moved by the message, and are almost persuaded then and there to receive Christ as their Saviour, but a lingering doubt remains. An evil heart suggests delay. They remark that tomorrow will do just as well as today. They are not quite ready. The truth convinces, the Holy Spirit convicts and moves, solemn motives plead for an immediate reception of Christ, but the high resolve is lacking. Alas! It is the bitter experience of millions who have passed beyond the possibility of salvation.

Agrippa should have been altogether a Christian instead of almost persuaded to be one. What was wrong that he was not altogether persuaded to be a Christian? The trouble lay in his own wicked heart. He decided that it would cost him too much to be altogether persuaded. There were many things that he did not want to give up. No doubt he thought that he would become a Christian some day, but he was not willing to do so then. Here, then, we see another poor soul belonging to that great multitude whose hearts had willingly heard the gospel message, and had almost yielded and become a Christian, but finally had decided to reject rather than to receive Christ. Agrippa was not willing to yield his stubborn will to the perfect will of Christ. Those who are almost persuaded to be Christians are kept from Christ only by their own love for Satan and sin.

Doubtless there are multiplied thousands like Agrippa, who are almost persuaded to be Christians. They are conscious that they need a Saviour. They intend to be saved some day. They think it would be horrible to die without being saved and go to hell forever. Sometime when it is convenient, sometime when they are more interested in the matter, they will be saved, they think. Sometime when it will not mean giving up so much that is sinful, they hope and expect to be saved. They are almost persuaded to be saved, but not quite.

Had Agrippa become a Christian, doubtless we would have heard much more about him and his subsequent life. Now we recall him merely as one who was brought near to the kingdom, but not near enough. He stands out as a definite warning to all who refuse to receive Christ and be saved. We are ready to admit that Agrippa made a terrible mistake, but what about ourselves? Perhaps some of you are not saved simply because you too are held back by a desire for popularity or a fear of ridicule. Whatever may be the bonds which keep you from trusting Christ and being saved, be sure to break them without delay, while you still have the opportunity. The one thing that matters is whether you are saved.

Can't you hear Agrippa saying, "Just think, I heard Paul preach! He stood before me with the chain rattling on his wrist as he motioned. His voice trembled with concern as he spoke to me. I remember how his eyes flashed and how he forgot all about his chain, and the danger to which he was subjected, as he pleaded with me to receive Christ as my Saviour and be saved. Oh, just think, I heard the Apostle Paul preach, but I refused to get saved and now I am in hell!"

Here we see Paul in one of his grandest moments saying to Agrippa, "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." Can you say as much to anybody whom you know? You might be able to say to another, "I wish that you were as good a Christian as my godly mother, or I wish you were as good a Christian as Peter, or John, or Barnabas, or Paul." But what about yourself? How far could you go in wishing that another man were a Christian like you, except for some handi-cap.

What then was Paul? He was a Christian, a man who had received Christ as his Saviour and had enthroned Him as the Lord 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 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 did not have any misgivings about his having acted wisely in becoming a Christian. He was filled with joy. He was far more happy in his fetters than any person in the audience to which he was testifying.

Look at the nobility and grandeur of the earnest desire expressed by Paul. He told Agrippa that he would like for him to be a Christian like himself with but one exception, namely, "these bonds." He did not want the King to wear a chain on his wrist or ankle day and night as he had done. How about you? Do you want others to be just the kind of Christian that you are?

It was possible for Agrippa to become a Christian; otherwise, Paul never would have expressed such a wish. That which made Paul a Christian would have made Agrippa a Christian also. 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 godly; and Christ can do the same thing for us.

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 kingdom of God and yet remain unsaved! Agrippa missed the chance of a lifetime. Surely that was a tragic doom to have only one step between him and life, and that step not taken.

The story is told of the Royal Charter, a ship which went down long years ago outside of the harbor of Liverpool. It was a ship which in its time, corresponded to the Titanic. The ship had just completed a tour of the waters of the world and had on board a distinguished company

of passengers. Many of the passengers were Liverpool citizens, and great preparations were being made in that city to welcome the voyagers. And yet, on the last night, just a few hours before being scheduled to arrive at Liverpool, the ship caught fire, and went down to the depths with only a few surviving. The morning came, and Liverpool was all excitement and in readiness. Then the few survivors reached the shore and told the awful story. The story, then, had to be carried to the homes in Liverpool.

Dr. Taylor, one of God's great servants in that city, was commissioned to carry the news to one of his little families. With heavy heart he went to the home and knocked at the door. A little flaxen-haired girl welcomed him and said:

"Dr. Taylor, Papa is coming home soon and Mama is getting him a good breakfast. You must stay too. I will run and tell Mama.

And she hurried away to tell her mother. Soon the mother appeared and joyfully said:

"Oh, Dr. Taylor, you have come at the right time. Husband is to be here in a few minutes."

And then she stopped, as she saw Dr. Taylor's distress, and said:

"What is the matter, Dr. Taylor? What has happened? Tell me quickly, Do not hold me in suspense."

And he said to her, "Little woman, I am the bearer of evil tidings. The ship upon which your husband was traveling, has gone down, and your husband is drowned with the rest."

She looked at him a moment, turned pale, then uttered a piercing cry and fell unconscious at his feet. This was her cry:

"O God, he got so near home, and yet will never come."

And I am sure that the saddest cry in all hell will be that same awful, agonizing cry, "O God, I got so near home, and yet it is too late."

Those of you who are almost persuaded to become Christians are certainly in a hopeful condition. But you cannot have salvation and enjoy the blessings of being a Christian 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 in receiving Christ and His salvation! Do not miss the opportunity of a lifetime. Since there is only a step between you and Christ, take it and become a Christian now by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. Then come forward and acknowledge Him as your saviour, while we join in singing the hymn of invitation.

"Only a step to Jesus,
A step from sin to grace,
What has thy heart decided?
The moments fly apace.
Only a step to Jesus,
Then why not take it now?"