

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 miss an opportunity to tell anybody about Christ. 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. 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.

Paul had been a prisoner in Caesarea for months. Governor Festus told King Agrippa about this pestilent fellow. He did not dare to let Paul out of jail, knowing that the result would be a revival or a riot. When he and Bernice arrived in Caesarea, Agrippa expressed to Festus a desire

to hear Paul. At the command of Festus Paul was brought into the presence of the dignitaries to answer the charges which had been made against him.

It has never been possible to keep Christianity at the bottom of the social scale for long. Christ began His work in the obscure synagogues of Galilee, but before He died He had stood before Pontius Pilate, Herod and the rulers of the Jews. So it was with Paul. He began his ministry in Damascus and in the deserts of Arabia, but before its close he had appeared before Roman procurators and Jewish kings, and had even been called before the tribunal of Caesar.

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 commanded Paul to speak, he began his wonderful defense by complimenting the king upon his knowledge of the Jews. Then Paul spoke about his own life prior to his conversion. He certainly had a wonderful story to tell. He related what Christ had done for him on the Damascus road. He also told how he was sent to turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.

As Paul preached to Agrippa about Christ, His death, burial and resurrection, he was interrupted by Festus, who cried out in a loud voice, "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad." Paul made a courteous, earnest and full disavowal of madness, declaring, "I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness." Then he turned directly to king Agrippa, and addressing him personally, said, "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets?" Then, before Agrippa had time to reply, Paul answered for him, "I know that thou believest." In Agrippa's heart was the conviction that Paul was correctly interpreting what the prophets had foretold, so he exclaimed, "Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." In other words, "With a little more persuasion thou wouldst make me a Christian."

Had we been present in the Judgment Hall that day and heard Agrippa's tone and accent, we would have known for a certainty just what he meant, for those things would have revealed the note of irony, if it was that, or the note of sincerity and earnestness, whether it was merely the sarcastic rejoinder of an evil man or the wistful cry of one who was on the verge of receiving Christ. Everything indicates that it was a sincere utterance. That Agrippa was almost persuaded to be a Christian was the way Paul interpreted his remark.

Agrippa should have been altogether instead of almost persuaded to be a Christian. What was wrong that he was not altogether persuaded? The trouble lay in his own wicked heart. It would have cost him too much to be altogether persuaded. He was not yet willing to repent of and to give up his sins. He 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.

I. Paul's 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 received Christ as the Saviour of his soul and 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 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.

II. Paul's Circumstances.

When Paul stood before Agrippa he was a prisoner in bonds. 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. Paul's Concern.

Paul 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 him to wear a chain on his ankle or wrist day and night as he had done. How about you? Do you wish that others were Christians as you are? What would you have eliminated?

It is quite evident Paul never regretted becoming a Christian. When he stood before Agrippa he had been a disciple of Christ for many years, and had passed through much suffering for His sake. 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. 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 good; and Christ can make us like him.

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!

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 Mamma is getting him a good breakfast. You must stay too. I will run and tell Mamma."

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 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.