

“THAT OLD TIME RELIGION”

“Almost Persuaded! Almost Saved!”

Scripture Reading – Acts, 26:19-32

Paul said, “King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles”.

At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defence. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane”.

“I am not insane, most excellent Festus”, Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do”.

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Paul replied, “Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains”.

The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. They left the room, and while talking with one another, they said, “This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment”. Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar”.

‘As God’s fellow-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says, “In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you”. I tell you, now is the time of God’s favour, now is the day of salvation.’

II Corinthians, 6:1-2, NIV

This series, based on THE BOOK OF ACTS, is entitled ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’.

The reason I want to call this series ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’ is that we need to look back in order that we might really look to the future. The OLD TIME RELIGION needs to become the NEW TIME RELIGION because it is the ALL TIME RELIGION. If we get back to the basics of life in the Christian Church, we might better understand what the Holy Spirit can do through us today.

THE BOOK OF ACTS is the story of success; the story of a church triumphant.

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The New Testament\Acts\That Old Time Religion\24 Almost Persuaded! Almost Saved!

It is the story of a small group of uncultured and generally unlearned people with meagre resources – very little money, no prestige, and no church buildings. This small group of people went out to tell the story of a publicly executed Jew. They went out against three obstacles – the imperial might of the Romans, the intellectual sophistication of the Greeks, and the religious bigotry of the Jews. They turned the world inside out and upside down for Jesus Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles is the story of a church on fire with evangelism and growth...

“ALMOST PERSUADED! ALMOST SAVED!”

The Rev Mr Brundage preached a sermon in a prison, before over 800 people. His concluding sentence was to become famous: ‘HE WHO IS ALMOST PERSUADED IS ALMOST SAVED; BUT TO BE ALMOST SAVED IS TO BE ENTIRELY LOST’. In response, over two-thirds of the prisoners received Jesus as Lord and Saviour. They were not lost. They were persuaded, and they were saved.

Philip P Bliss heard about the incident, and it inspired him to write his well-known hymn: ‘ALMOST PERSUADED, NOW TO BELIEVE’. A hymn that is based on the responses to the Gospel by Governor Felix in **Acts, 24:25** (see the sermon ‘**THE PROBLEM OF PROCRASTINATION**’) and King Agrippa in **Acts, 26:28**.

*Almost persuaded, now to believe,
Almost persuaded, Christ to receive,
Seems now some soul to say: Go, Spirit, go thy way,
Some more convenient day on thee I’ll call.*

*Almost persuaded, come, come today;
Almost persuaded, turn not away.
Jesus invites you here, angels are lingering near,
Prayers rise from hearts so dear, O wanderer, come.*

*Almost persuaded, harvest is past;
Almost persuaded, doom comes at last.
Almost cannot avail, almost is sure to fail,
Sad, sad, that bitter wail, almost but lost.*

Philip Paul Bliss, SASB 226:1-3

We skip forward in ACTS and find Paul before King Agrippa and Governor Festus.

For two years Festus had held Paul a prisoner in Caesarea Maritima (Caesarea-by-the-Sea). Three days after Felix succeeded Festus as Governor, ‘**THE CHIEF PRIESTS AND JEWISH LEADERS APPEARED BEFORE HIM AND PRESENTED THE CHARGES AGAINST PAUL. THEY URGENTLY REQUESTED FESTUS, AS A FAVOUR TO THEM, TO HAVE PAUL TRANSFERRED TO JERUSALEM, FOR THEY WERE PREPARING AN AMBUSH TO KILL HIM ALONG THE WAY**’ (see **Acts, 25:2-3**).

Unaware of the plot to kill Paul, Festus asked him if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem to be stand trial. Paul knew he would not receive a fair hearing in the Sanhedrin Council, so he responded to the Governor by exercising his right as a Roman citizen – he appealed his case to the Emperor, Augustus Caesar.

While waiting for a ship to take Paul to Rome, Festus asked Agrippa to help him in ‘SPECIFYING THE CHARGES’ against Paul (see **Acts, 25:27**). Agrippa, the great-grandson of King Herod the Great, knew much more about the ways of the Jewish people. He had been appointed ruler of Abilene – a part of Galilee – Iturea, and Trachonitis, by the Roman Emperor, Claudius.

King Agrippa permitted Paul to speak freely about the charges made against him.

This is one of the most dramatic scenes in all of the Word of God, and in all of human history. It is the scene where the great preacher, teacher, and soul-winner, Paul, is standing before King Agrippa, his wife Bernice, the new Governor of the region, Festus, high ranking officers, and the leading men of the city of Caesarea Maritima.

As you look at the men in this particular scene, you will find the variety of attitudes people have towards the Lord Jesus Christ...

FESTUS REPRESENTS THOSE WHO ARE ALIENATED FROM CHRIST

Festus thought that Paul was going mad right before his very eyes. As Paul preached and testified about the Lord Jesus Christ, Festus exclaimed to him: **“PAUL, YOU ARE GOING CRAZY” (CEV). “YOU ARE MAD” (GNB)**. Our text today states: **“YOU ARE OUT OF YOUR MIND, YOUR GREAT LEARNING IS DRIVING YOU INSANE”** (see **Acts, 26:24b**).

Many consider faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to be insanity.

When people get carried away, or get excited about pleasures, or sports, or money, or other things, they are not considered insane. For example, those who live and breathe football are usually not considered crazy. But, if you get excited about the Lord Jesus Christ, about Eternal Life, about Heaven and Hell, about the Good News of the Gospel, then you must be a religious nut! You are a fruitcake! There is something wrong with you!

Remember that the family of Jesus once thought he was insane.

Because of the things he was saying, the family of Jesus went to get him to take him home to safety and out of the limelight – all because they thought he was going mad. But his burning commitment to be the Saviour of the World won through, and when Jesus was raised from the dead, some of the members of his family saw the truth for themselves, and they believed.

“I am not insane, most excellent Festus”, Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable”.’

Acts, 26:25, NIV

PAUL REPRESENTS THOSE WHO ARE ALTOGETHER FOR CHRIST

Paul practically said to King Agrippa, “I WOULD THAT YOU WERE NOT ALMOST, BUT ALTOGETHER... EVEN AS I AM”. When Paul met Jesus Christ, his life was totally changed, and he completely committed himself to the Lord. Paul’s motto and philosophy of life was summarised in his own words: **‘FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST’** (see **Philippians, 1:21**).

AGRIPPA REPRESENTS THOSE WHO ARE ALMOST TO CHRIST

Agrippa replied, **“ALMOST THOU PERSUADEST ME TO BE A CHRISTIAN”** (see **Acts, 26:28, KJV**). Although a better and more accurate translation would be: **“DO YOU THINK THAT IN SUCH A SHORT TIME YOU CAN PERSUADE ME TO BE A CHRISTIAN?” (NIV)**. Agrippa’s response was really full of sarcasm, but Paul still treated him with grace and respect.

Over the centuries, great preachers (such as **John Wesley**) have emphasised the story of a tragedy. The tragedy of being an ‘ALMOST CHRISTIAN’ as opposed to an ‘ALTOGETHER CHRISTIAN’. Other great preachers (such as **Charles H Spurgeon**) have emphasised that Agrippa was not an ‘ALMOST CHRISTIAN’, but he was ‘ALMOST PERSUADED TO BE A CHRISTIAN’.

There is a great difference between being ‘ALMOST A CHRISTIAN’ and being ‘ALMOST PERSUADED TO BE A CHRISTIAN’. A man may be almost a Salvationist, and so he may hold most, if not all, of the Articles of Faith as being true and reasonable, but unless he shows true repentance and exercises saving faith, he is not a Christian (or a true Salvationist)! A man who is almost an artist knows something of painting, but a man almost persuaded to be an artist may not even know the names of the colours.

A Christian friend told me a story about his efforts to get his father to accept the Gospel, to accept salvation through faith in Christ alone. His father wept on more than one occasion when he discussed his need to repent and trust in Jesus Christ. Oh, how broken-hearted he was. His mind was at its most tender point. He possessed in those moments enough knowledge to know that there is a God, that God loved him, and that Jesus died on the Cross of Calvary for his sins. But before his son he only came close. Almost. He could hear him say, “Almost, my son, you persuade me”.

Today, my friend does not know if his father is in glory, or eternally lost. It is his fervent hope and prayer that he is in glory with Christ this very hour, and that someday he will see him again with exceedingly great joy. But if he is, it is only because he repented and called on Christ at a time and place of which he was not aware.

The saddest word heard at the judgment will be the bitter cry of ‘ALMOST’.

To be ‘ALMOST PERSUADED’ to become a Christian, is to be a child of Satan. To be ‘ALMOST PERSUADED’ to repent of your sins, is to die in those sins. To be ‘ALMOST PERSUADED’ to go to Heaven, is to be destined for an eternity in Hell. To be ‘ALMOST PERSUADED’ is to be almost saved. To be almost saved is to be entirely lost.

*Almost persuaded, now to believe,
Almost persuaded, Christ to receive.
Almost cannot avail, almost is sure to fail,
Sad, sad, that bitter wail, almost but lost.*

‘THE PREACHING OF PAUL’

The great purpose of Paul’s preaching, according to Agrippa’s confession, was to persuade him to be a Christian. The Apostle himself acknowledged the same design in his concluding sentence: **“SHORT TIME OR LONG – I PRAY GOD THAT NOT ONLY YOU BUT ALL WHO ARE LISTENING TO ME TODAY MAY BECOME WHAT I AM, EXCEPT FOR THESE CHAINS”** (see **Acts, 26:29**).

In this parting word, which was full of grace, Paul unveiled the desire of his heart – he did not seek release from his chains, but the deliverance from the bondage of sin all those who heard his testimony.

‘A MAN CONVINCED AGAINST HIS WILL IS OF THE SAME OPINION STILL’ (Martin Luther).

How can a person be persuaded to become a Christian? What methods can be used to get a person’s attention in order to persuade them to become a child of God?

Paul employed at least four methods of persuasion...

THE PRESENCE OF A PERSONAL SOUL-WINNER

‘Paul said, “King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven... I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike”.’

Acts, 26:19, 22, NIV

It was no accident that Paul was standing before these influential people.

After his conversion on the Damascus Road, God sent Ananias to Paul to minister to him. As well as helping restore Saul’s spiritual sight, Ananias revealed that God had purposed that Paul was his **‘CHOSEN INSTRUMENT TO CARRY [HIS] NAME BEFORE THE GENTILES AND THEIR KINGS AND BEFORE THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL’** (see **Acts, 9:15**).

Paul had already learned that not everyone would receive his message.

The Jews were actively seeking his death, whilst the Gentiles gave his words a mixed reception. At Athens, for example, some sneered at his preaching, some delayed making a decision until a later unspecified date, but some believed (see **Acts, 17:32-34**). Whatever the response he had experienced earlier, Paul was not put off from giving his testimony again and again, and he never stopped preaching the Gospel.

Paul was serious about winning souls for the Kingdom – are we?

‘The average church member has listened to 6,000 sermons, heard 8,000 prayers, sung 20,000 songs and hymns over and over again, and asked ZERO persons to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour.’

Herb Miller

Nowadays, most people come to Jesus because of family or friends.

- 80% of new Christians come to Jesus because of personal witness.
- 9% of new Christians are won because of church programme or special events.
- 6% of new Christians come to Jesus because of the minister.
- 3% of new Christians just walk into a church uninvited.
- 2% come, stay, and find Christ, because the church meets a specific need they have.

THE PREACHING OF A POWERFUL SAINT

‘Paul said, “First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn

to God and prove their repentance by their deeds... I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike”.’

Acts, 26:20, 22, NIV

The Gospel is like the door of Noah’s Ark.

Immediately before the Flood, the door on Noah’s Ark was the sole means of entry into the refuge it offered. The only way to safely from the flood that would engulf the world outside. The long legged, long necked, tallest land animal, the giraffe, had to go in by the door just like the smallest lowliest animal alive. Even the majestic eagle, that soars hundreds of feet up in the air, had only one means by which to enter the Ark, and that was by way of the door. If not by the door, then nothing could enter. Either the animals along with Noah and his family came through by way of the door or not at all.

Jesus is the door to salvation; there is no other way.

Paul preached the same requirements to Jews and Gentiles alike. He preached the same requirements to the rich and poor, those who were **‘SMALL AND GREAT ALIKE’**. Paul **‘PREACHED THAT THEY SHOULD REPENT AND TURN TO GOD AND PROVE THEIR REPENTANCE BY THEIR DEEDS’**.

‘REPENTANCE’ comes from the Greek ‘METANOIA’, meaning ‘A CHANGE OF MIND’.

Dictionary: *‘to feel such regret or dissatisfaction over some past action, or intention, as to change one’s mind about it; to feel so contrite over one’s sins to change, or decide to change, one’s ways’.*

‘Repentance means ‘TURNING’, or – more specifically – ‘TURNING TO GOD’. In turning to God, the penitent also turns away from something – from that which he has come to realise is displeasing to God. The act is accompanied by sorrow, for that makes repentance necessary. If there is not this sorrow for the evil deed or for the evil condition, then there is no true repentance.’

“BLACK’S BIBLE DICTIONARY”, Madeleine Miller & J Lane Miller

THE PERSUASION OF A PRECIOUS SAVIOUR

‘Paul said, “I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles”.’

Acts, 26:22-23, NIV

Paul invited his audience into an imaginary tour into the life and death of Jesus.

Did Paul tell the King about the scourging that the Roman soldiers had inflicted upon Jesus? Did he tell him how they whipped Jesus to within an inch of his death? Did he describe how Jesus stood silently before those who accused him and beat him with clubs? Did he talk about the horrors of crucifixion and the painful death of Jesus on the Cross? Did he mention how they took Jesus’ body down and laid it in the tomb? Did he discourse on the resurrection on the third day?

Paul set Jesus before his hearers and asked them to make a decision about him. It was a decision that would have a lasting impact upon them for all eternity.

THE PURPOSE OF PENETRATING SCRIPTURE

‘Paul said, “I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen... The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner”.’

Acts, 26:22b, 26, NIV

Paul did not quote passages of Scripture in this sermon.

Nonetheless, he claimed that everything he was saying he could back up from Scripture. He claimed that what happened to Jesus was foretold by Moses and the prophets, and nothing that Paul said was stretching the truths of Scripture.

What things did Paul consider Agrippa was familiar with?

Festus had enlisted the help of Agrippa because the King was familiar with the Jews. His family had dealt with them for many years, so he had an insight into their beliefs and behaviour the Governor had not. Not only that, Paul was aware that Agrippa was familiar with the Scriptures. So much so, that Paul said: **‘KING AGRIPPA, DO YOU BELIEVE THE PROPHETS? I KNOW YOU DO’** (see **Acts, 26:27**).

The purpose of Scripture is to help us to be saved.

The intention of the Bible is to bring a person face to face with his sin; face to face with their need of salvation; face to face with the Lord Jesus Christ. It cuts like a sword; it crushes like a hammer; it consumes like a fire. But it shows us the way to salvation.

‘As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.’

II Timothy, 3:14-15, NIV

*Whilst the Metropolitan Tabernacle was being refurbished, Charles H Spurgeon was reading Scripture and said: ‘BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD, WHICH TAKETH AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD’ (see **John, 1:29, KJV**). A carpenter working in the balcony heard these words and could think of nothing else. As he continued his work, the words permeated into his heart. At home, in bed, he lay awake hearing those words over and over again. He went to Spurgeon the next morning and the preacher helped him find salvation. One verse of Scripture helped lead him to Jesus.*

Application

The saddest word heard at the judgment will be the bitter cry of ‘ALMOST’.

To be ‘ALMOST PERSUADED’ to become a Christian, is to be a child of Satan. To be ‘ALMOST PERSUADED’ to repent of your sins, is to die in those sins. To be ‘ALMOST PERSUADED’ to go to

Heaven, is to be destined for an eternity in Hell. To be ‘ALMOST PERSUADED’ is to be almost saved. To be almost saved is to be entirely lost.

ALMOST – a very dangerous place to be; it means that you are not there.

If you are almost home, then you are not home...

On 5 August 1997, a Korean Air Boeing 747 jumbo jet crashed in Guam. After a long flight from Seoul, South Korea, the plane was on final approach when something went wrong at the last minute. Instead of landing safely on the runway, the plane crashed in sight of its destination and all passengers aboard were killed. You see, the plane was almost safely at the airport, but it never arrived.

ALMOST – how close is almost? It may as well be a million miles away!

If you have a religious experience or even a spiritual experience and you almost reach out and claim the salvation that Jesus Christ so freely offers, then where does that leave you? If you are already saved, and want to experience more of Christ, but there is an ‘ALMOST’ in your commitment and consecration, where does that leave you?

William Hyatt, a 62 year old man, was driving through the Mojave Desert when his car broke down. Without any help, he walked, staggered, and then crawled for 22 miles until he came to a hill. He managed to scale the height as the last ounce of energy drained out of him. At the bottom of the same hill, less than half-a-mile away, he saw the Saragota Spring that could have saved him. He never reached the water. He was almost there, but he was lost.

ALMOST – the Children of Israel were at the border of the Promised Land.

The mighty hand of God had delivered his people from slavery in Egypt – What greater act of deliverance could there be than that? The guidance of God had brought the people safely across the desert to the borders of the Promised Land – What greater demonstration of his providence could there be than that? At the border of the Promised Land, at Kadesh Barnea, spies were sent out to scout out the land before the invasion took place.

With the exception of Caleb and Joshua, all the spies came back with the opinion that the dangers ahead were so terrible and the people so strong, that they could never win their way into the Promised Land. The people rejected the report of Caleb and Joshua, who alone were for going on, and accepted the report of those who insisted that the case was hopeless.

*Just outside the land of promise
You have waited many years,
And your life has been o’erclouded
With a host of haunting fears.
There is victory in Jesus.
Come to him without delay;
Seek just now a full salvation
And the voice of God obey.*

Walter Henry Windybank, SASB 433:1

HAVE YOU BEEN WAITING AT THE BORDER OF A ‘SPIRITUAL’ PROMISED LAND?