

Almost Persuaded

Ezekiel 33:30–33, Acts 26:24–32

Paul has been led up from a Roman prison to address Governor Festus, King Agrippa, Bernice, the Roman commanders and the prominent men of Caesarea. Paul uses the opportunity to give his personal testimony of how, though raised a Jew, and later a zealous persecutor of Christians, the Lord converted him and called him to preach the good news of the resurrected Christ.

As Agrippa sits and listens to the apostle Paul, he is transfixed. What Paul is saying makes sense. As Paul testifies to the Christian faith, he is indeed “saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come” (v. 22). Paul is being true to the message of the Old Testament. Christ is the one spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures. Those Scriptures witness “that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles” (v. 23). Indeed, Christ suffered for our sins. “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isa. 53:4). Indeed, Christ rose from the dead. After his body had lain in the tomb for three days and three nights, Christ rose from the dead on the first day of the week. The great stone had been rolled away, exposing an empty tomb. The disciples go to the tomb, taking with them a large quantity of spices to preserve a corpse, but when they get there, the tomb is empty! There, undisturbed, is the long linen fabric that had been tightly rolled around Christ’s body. There, off to the side, lay the handkerchief that had been around his head, not lying with the linen cloth, but folded neatly by itself. What happened to the corpse? It is gone, slipped out of the linen winding without disturbing it. If grave robbers had come secretly and carried away the body, they would have carried the body in its linen cloths. The burial cloths would be gone. But there they were, a silent testimony to Christ’s resurrection. He has risen from the dead! He is alive! Yes, Christ would suffer, he would be the first to rise from the dead, a down-payment guaranteeing the future resurrection of his people. In his preaching Christ would proclaim the light of the gospel. Indeed, as Isaiah says, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined” (Isa. 9:2). Christ is the light of the world! His gospel is the truth. It is the most valuable message in the whole world. Do not neglect it!

Agrippa has a great privilege, and he doesn’t know it. He has the privilege of sitting under the preaching of the apostle Paul—to hear the gospel articulated by the most eminent theologian the world has ever produced. Here was a man who was born and raised in a pious Jewish home. Here was a man who had been patiently instructed by the eminent rabbi Gamaliel. Here was a man who was deeply committed to the Jewish faith—so committed that he was determined to destroy anything that was opposed to it. He perceived Christianity as a rival

religion that had to be stamped out by force, as a threat to the true faith. Paul, like the Jews of his day, didn't believe in pluralism. Yesterday I saw a bumper sticker: "Freedom of religion is freedom for *all* religions." Judging from the other bumper stickers I saw on that car, the owner is advocating for freedom for Satanism and secularism—but the Jews of the first century would have none of that.

So here comes an educated, knowledgeable, articulate theologian, Saul, and when he meets the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he becomes his committed follower and disciple. This did not make for an easy life. Suddenly, Saul became a wanted man—the Jews wanted to destroy him. Obviously, Paul did not convert to Christianity out of a desire for worldly advantage. There was only one reason why Saul converted to Christianity, and that was because he was absolutely convinced that it was the *truth*. There is a lesson for us here: if Christ indeed is "the way, the truth and the life"—if apart from him there is no salvation—then, no matter how much you will be hated, vilified, spat upon, and persecuted, the only reasonable thing is to become his worshiper and follower. No amount of tribulation, or distress, or persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword is too high a price. Eternal life in heaven with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is too valuable. I don't want to go to hell! Take the world, but give me Jesus! No amount of suffering for the cause of Christ is too great.

Is this how you see it? Are you willing to take Christ's yoke upon you and become his devoted disciple and worshiper? Will you swear undying allegiance to Christ to the end of your days? He is the lord of all. What he thinks of me is the most important thing. As his follower, I want to obey him, serve him, love him. What he has done for me is too great—too valuable.

When Paul reached the climax of his message, emphasizing "that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles," Agrippa interrupted him. And he didn't just mutter under his breath. We read that "as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a *loud* voice, 'Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!'" He spoke so that everyone in the room could hear. Agrippa's word for "mad" is *mania*, the root of our phrase *manic depressive*. Agrippa is accusing Paul of being out of his mind, of being mentally unstable. For Agrippa, what other explanation could there be? Why would anyone leave the stability and respectability of Judaism for something so divisive and so seemingly transitory as the Christian faith? Judaism had its temple; the church met in homes.

In a way, the Jews of Paul's day had it made. They enjoyed favored status from the Romans. They were the insiders. As long as they didn't rock the boat too much, the Romans left them alone. The Romans saw the Jewish leaders as their helpers in the enterprise of preserving the peace, of keeping the population subdued.

Christians, on the other hand, were perceived as rabble-rousers, as threats to stability, as a fringe group that needed to be stamped out.

Paul replies, “I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.”

Paul didn't just want to talk theory and make a point, he wanted Agrippa to *believe*. He had a genuine interest in Agrippa's soul. Do we care about the people around us? Do we want them to come to faith in Christ? As we interact with friends and neighbors, our aim should be that they be converted, that they voluntarily submit themselves to the lordship of Christ, that they become his committed followers. Here is the greatest need in any person's life, to be rightly related to him with whom we have to do. The Bible teaches that the whole human race fell in Adam. All of us are lost and without hope apart from Christ. We may be successful in this world, we may enjoy an easy life. We may have plenty of this world's goods and enjoy the good life. But apart from Christ we are enemies of God. We are under his wrath. We are sinners, and “the wages of sin is death”—eternal separation from a holy God in the fires of hell. That is our destination apart from Christ. But the gospel is “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” Christ is the Savior. If we put our hope and trust in him, he will save us. He will take away our sin, make us his disciples and put the love of God in our hearts. From the moment of our conversion we will be devoted to love and good works. We will want our life to count for Christ. We will want to see our loved ones, our friends, our neighbors become Christ's followers. We will want them to become his worshipers, worshiping Christ in the company of his church. “We long to see thy churches full, that all the chosen race may, with one voice and heart and soul, sing thy redeeming grace.” To be in the presence of God's people, singing his praises, is a foretaste of heaven! It is glorious. It is a foretaste of the glory that shall be revealed.

When the church comes together, our focus is on Christ. We pray to Christ, we lift up our voices in song to Christ, we receive his blessing, his forgiveness. We sit at his feet and hear his gospel. Our total focus is on Christ, not on pleasing ourselves or our neighbor. Christ is in our midst, and we want to please him above all. He is Lord! To him every knee shall bow! The Christian bows voluntarily, out of love for Christ.

As Paul spoke, King Agrippa listened attentively. He followed Paul's reasoning. He saw how the Hebrew Scriptures pointed to Christ. Paul asked him, “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?” Agrippa wanted to say yes, but he was not

yet ready to commit. Finally, he said to Paul, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”

“Almost persuaded” is a pithy, pregnant phrase. The Bible does not teach that there are multiple destinations for the dead. The Bible knows only two: heaven and hell. Moses said, “I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you *life* and *death*, *blessing* and *cursing*: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live” (Deut. 30:19). Jesus spoke of this when, teaching on the final judgment, he said, “These shall go away into *everlasting punishment*: but the righteous into *life eternal*” (Matt. 25:46). “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not *perish*, but have everlasting life.” Those who believe in Jesus Christ go to life eternal; to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. On the other hand, those who reject Jesus Christ perish and go to everlasting punishment.

There is an example of being “almost persuaded” in our Old Testament text from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a priest who was exiled to Babylon with many of his countrymen in 597 BC. The exiles are living in a strange land over a thousand miles away from home. They are separated from the worship of God taking place back at the temple in Jerusalem. The exiles from Judah come to hear Ezekiel preach. He speaks Hebrew, the language of their heart. He tells of warning and judgment. He predicts the fall of Jerusalem. After Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, just as Ezekiel predicted, in 586 BC, Ezekiel prophesies hope and comfort for God’s people. His vision of the valley of dry bones (ch. 37) is a vivid picture of God’s ability to renew and regenerate—to bring life out of death, hope out of despair and hopelessness. In our text this morning Yahweh speaks to the prophet. He calls him “son of man” (בן־אָדָם—literally “son of Adam,” an evocative phrase used 93 times in this book. Ezekiel is representative of all the fallen sons and daughters of Adam who are utterly dependent upon the Creator and need to be reminded of that. Yahweh speaks to Ezekiel. He tells him, “As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking about you. They are saying, ‘Come and hear the word of the LORD.’ They come and sit before you. They hear your words, but they do not do them; their hearts are intent on their own pursuits. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument. They hear your words, but they do not do them. The people come to hear you because they delight in your oratorical skills. They listen to the cadence of your voice, they marvel at your ability to form word-pictures, but they do not obey. They hear what you are saying, but they do not put it into practice.” They are “almost persuaded,” but they do not take the step of commitment.

This is the reality of the human condition apart from Christ. People hear God’s moral demands. They hear God’s law, and in their heart of hearts, they know that it is true. They fail to keep it, but they make excuses. They excuse their disobedience.

This is what was happening in the heart of king Agrippa as he listened to Paul's testimony. Agrippa, with his background in Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures, knew that what Paul was saying was true. He could see the rationale for the Christian faith. It made sense. He was transfixed by Paul's oratorical skills. He followed Paul's logic. He understood it. But what Paul was calling for was a radical change, and due to his circumstances as a Jew put into power by the Romans, he could not make that change. He would lose all ability to govern the Jewish people if he became a Christian. There would be rioting. That would be the end of his career. Agrippa uttered one of the most evocative phrases that has ever been uttered: "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

What a tragic word: "almost"!

It is akin to saying, "He was in a serious accident, and *almost* survived!" To "almost" survive a fatal accident is to die, and ultimately to face God.

"Almost persuaded" means *I am almost persuaded to believe*. What is the status of those who are "almost" persuaded? Heaven or hell? Does someone who is almost persuaded believe? No! Therefore, to be *almost* persuaded is to *not* believe. It is to reject Christ as Lord. The fact of the matter is that those who do not believe are on their way to eternity in the lake of fire.

When the word of God is preached, it is a moment of crisis. All who hear it are duty-bound to receive it. To receive the Gospel is to receive the greatest gift anyone could ever receive—the gift of eternal life. To be "almost persuaded" is to *reject* the gospel. It is to go to hell. The hymnwriter Philip P. Bliss expressed it this way: "'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,' harvest is past! 'Almost persuaded,' doom comes at last! 'Almost' cannot avail; 'Almost' is but to fail! Sad, sad, that bitter wail—'Almost,' but lost!"¹

To *almost* make it to a safe harbor in a violent storm is to be lost at sea.

To *almost* make it to a warm cabin in Antarctica is to freeze to death.

To *almost* make a safe landing is to crash and die.

About an hour after takeoff on September 2, 1998, the pilots of Swissair Flight 111 from New York to Geneva—a McDonnell Douglas MD-11—smelled smoke in the cockpit. Four minutes later, they began an immediate descent toward Halifax, Nova Scotia, about 65 miles away. But with the fire spreading and cockpit lights and instruments failing, the plane crashed into the Atlantic about five miles off the Nova Scotia coast. All 229 people aboard were killed.²

How tragic! The plane was in distress. The pilots recognized this and headed for the nearest airport, but didn't quite make it. The plane crashed into the ocean about

¹ Philip Paul Bliss, 1871

² <https://www.popularmechanics.com/flight/g73/the-most-famous-airplane-crashes/> accessed 5-7-23

five miles from land. The aircraft *almost* made it to land, but 229 people died at sea.

Agrippa's response to the gospel was, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." Here is one of only three uses of the word "Christian" in the Bible. In Greek it is Χριστιανός. A Christian is a follower of Christ, Χριστός, the anointed one.

Yesterday was the coronation of King Charles of England. The coronation occurred during a church service in Westminster Abbey. Before the king was crowned, he was anointed with Chrism oil by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The archbishop poured holy oil blessed in Jerusalem onto the Coronation Spoon. He then anointed the king by placing the oil onto his hands, chest and head.

Now God's Word doesn't tell the church to anoint earthly kings with special Chrism oil that has been blessed in Jerusalem. It doesn't direct the church to use a special Coronation Spoon. Those elements are superstition—"will worship" (Col. 2:23), that is, elements of worship that originate in the mind of man, not God. The church has no authority to institute elements of worship on its own. The regulative principle of worship requires us to worship God only in the manner that he himself has appointed in his holy Word. It forbids "the worshiping of God by images, or any other way *not* appointed in his word." The use of manmade elements of worship is idolatry, not authentic biblical religion.

Christ is the anointed one, the Messiah (from the Hebrew מָשִׁיחַ, anointed one). Our Lord Jesus was not anointed with the anointing oil which in the Old Testament was used for the priests of the Levitical priesthood. Rather, he was anointed with the Holy Spirit, "the oil of gladness." Psalm 45 says, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: the sceptre of thy kingdom is a right sceptre. Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness: therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows."

Rather than having olive oil poured over him, Christ had what the oil represented—the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity, whose purpose it is to glorify Christ. He received the Holy Spirit at his baptism. In Matthew 3 we read that "when He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'"

Christ, having received the Holy Spirit, pours out his Holy Spirit on his church.

When Agrippa said to Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian," Paul responded: "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."

Paul knew that he was on his way to heaven because of his faith in Jesus Christ. He tried his hardest to convince his hearers to put their faith in Christ, but

apparently none did. The peer pressure was too great. Here they were, important people, the principal men of the city. If any of them had said, “Paul is right, I believe,” what would people have thought?

Are you almost persuaded? If so, I invite you to put your full trust and confidence in Jesus Christ and receive eternal life. Believing in Jesus, you will surely want to submit to him by becoming a member of his church, his visible covenant people.

If you remain “almost persuaded,” you will perish eternally in hell. Amen.