

42. Almost Christian, really???

June 1, 2014

March 29, this year, Arizona Wildcat Basketball Team freshman forward Aaron Gordon was walking towards the bench after Arizona's 63-64 loss against Wisconsin in the NCAA Elite Eight at the Honda Center, CA. They could have won the game if their last shot made the basket. Yes, it was a "Could, Would, Should" thing. They almost won. The problem is that almost winning goes to the loser. It is not good enough.

Other places the word 'almost' does not work are pregnancy and height. Either a woman is pregnant or not at all, because she can not be almost pregnant. Either you are six feet tall or you are shorter than six feet and wish that you were, because you cannot be almost six feet tall.

One place that 'almost' really does not work is salvation. If you lose a basketball game, you can try again next time; if you are not six feet tall, you can try a pair of platform shoes. But once you die without salvation, you can not say, "I was almost saved," and hope that you will make it to heaven somehow. Not having salvation through Jesus Christ has far more sobering consequences.

Charles Spurgeon, a 19th Century British preacher said:

"Almost persuaded to be a Christian is like the man who was almost pardoned, but he was hanged; like the man who was almost rescued, but he was burned in the house. A man that is almost saved is damned."

This morning we are going to be in the auditorium of the Roman Governor's complex in Caesarea where a hearing occurred. Paul's speech before king Agrippa will be his sixth and final defense of Christianity recorded in the Book of Acts. Here king Agrippa confessed that he was almost persuaded to become a Christian. But he was not a Christian.

A. A BRIEF BY FESTUS

Acts 25:23-27 So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in. 24 And Festus said: "King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer. 25 But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. 26 I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place I may have something to write. 27 For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him."

This was more than a hearing of evidence, it was an event. It was held in an auditorium, and all the commanders and the prominent men of the city were there. All the people who came into the auditorium wore their adorned attires in front of king Agrippa, except Paul who was in chain.

Paul had been in Roman's custody for over two years and having already endured five trials, yet he still had not been charged with any crime according to Festus. Since

Paul appealed to Caesar, Festus had to send him to his emperor, but he could not send Paul with a letter that said, "I really don't know what this man is accused of and he is probably innocent of any wrongdoing, but I thought I should send him to you anyway." That was no way to get on the good side of Caesar .

B. DECLARING THE DEFENSE

Acts 26:1-8 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: 2 "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, 3 especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently. 4 My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. 5 They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. 6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. 7 To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. 8 Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?"

This was another tremendous opportunity for Paul. I am sure that he remembered what the Lord had promised to Paul that he would bear witness before "Gentiles and kings" when he was converted to Christianity. Once he was finished with his witness here, all the attendees would know how to be saved and they would be without excuse.

In fact, before the session ended, Paul became the judge, and Festus, King Agrippa, and Bernice became the defendants. Paul was indeed defending himself, but at the same time, he was presenting the truth of the Gospel and witnessing to the difference Jesus Christ can make in a person's life. This is the longest of Paul's speeches found in Acts.

As a great-grandson of Herod the Great, king Agrippa was a descendent of the Edomites. However, he was a Jew, not by nationality, but by religious practice and became an avid student of the OT Scriptures though he did not practice what he knew. He knew about Judaism and the Jewish custom far more than the Roman governor Festus.

Being raised from the dead is not anything new if you are a student of the OT Scriptures. Some have argued that the doctrine of a bodily resurrection was unknown to the Israelites of the Old Testament. In fact, this denial was a cardinal doctrine of the sect of the Sadducees at the time of Christ.

Isaiah 26:19 Your dead shall live; Together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; For your dew is like the dew of herbs, And the earth shall cast out the dead.

Job 19:25-26 For I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth; 26 And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God,

Daniel 12:2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt.

These promises were not referring to some vague "immortality of the soul" or "reincarnation" as taught in pagan religions, but to resurrection of the body of the believers of Almighty God.

The Greek pronoun 'you' in v8 is plural here, so Paul must have looked around at the entire audience as he spoke. The Greek and Roman people, of course, would not believe in the doctrine of the Resurrection, nor would the Sadducees who were present. To Paul, this was a crucial doctrine, because if there is no Resurrection, then Jesus Christ was not raised and Paul had no Gospel to preach as he wrote so eloquently in the Book of 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

Raising a dead person is nothing to our God who created the heavens and the earth as it stated in Genesis chapter 1. If you can believe the first verse of that chapter, believing in what the Lord said and did in the rest of the Bible is easy. Many unbelievers and even some Christians think that there are things that God cannot do.

This is what Jesus said:

Matthew 19:26 But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

C. I WAS NOT DISOBEDIENT

We are going to skip the portion from v9 to 18 because apostle Paul was recounting his conversion which we already studied in chapter 9 of this Book.

Acts 26:19-23 "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. 21 For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come-- 23 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."

What Paul said in v20 is a neat summary of Christian living – "*repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance*". Repentance without turning to God means nothing; and turning to God without repentance means nothing. You cannot have one without the other. These two becomes as work that is fitting repentance in a Christian's life to glorify God.

I've seen some people who claim to be Christians, but their lives do not display the evidence of their conversion. You cannot continue to live, think, speak, even vote like you were not saved after you receive Jesus into your heart. If your lifestyle has not changed at all since you claimed to be a Christian, you have to ask yourself if you were ever saved.

D. TWO REACTIONS TO THE TRUTH

Acts 26:24-32 Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" 25 But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. 26 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. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe." 28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." 29 And Paul said, "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." 30 When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and

those who sat with them; 31 and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains." 32 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

There is a saying, "Throw a rock into a pack of dogs, and the one that yells is the one that got hit." Festus had not interrupted because he really thought Paul was crazy. How strange that Festus did not think this apostle was crazy when he was persecuting the church, but now that he spoke the truth that pricked his conscience, Paul became a crazy man! Besides, if Festus thought that Paul was indeed a raving maniac, would he send him to his emperor? Festus was hit by the truth and he was yelling.

Some people who attended our church services chose not to come back, not because of my heavy Swedish accent, rather the truth of God pricked their conscience. They thought that if they didn't come back to our church, the truth might disappear.

Paul was not done. He looked at king Agrippa and asked him the question that demanded an answer for his life. Paul didn't first ask Agrippa if he believed on Jesus; he asked, "Do you believe the prophets?" Paul did this because he knew that if Agrippa did believe the prophets, truth and reason would lead him to believe upon Jesus. He wanted to connect what Agrippa already believed to what he should believe.

With this, Paul brought the challenge and a point of decision directly to Agrippa. This is a good and often necessary part of the presentation of the message of who Jesus is and what He did for us – calling the listener to decision.

The Greek words for 'almost' here comprised with two words – "en oligos". The meaning is "in a short time" or "in a little distance." However close Agrippa was to becoming a believer, it wasn't close enough. Of course, almost being a Christian means that you almost have eternal life and will almost be delivered from the judgment of hell; but almost isn't enough.

Ironically, although Paul remained in chains, his heart was free in Christ. And although Agrippa enjoyed unlimited freedom and power and luxury, his heart was chained in darkness of his depravity. So in the end, the prisoner was the free man in Christ, the king was the prisoner of his own sin.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) Hearing about Christ does not automatically bring internal change.

I am sure that you've heard this comment by Charles Spurgeon: "The same sun which melts wax hardens clay and the same Gospel which melts some persons to repentance hardens others in their sins." In this case, the hearts of Festus and Agrippa were hardened by their own choices.

2) Responding to Christ does not automatically remove external chains.

Spiritually, Paul was freer than anyone in that auditorium that day. But he still was in chains and he still had difficulties. However, because of his faith in Christ, he could live with the chains. That is Christ's power in action – not the removal of the hardships, rather peace in the midst of the storm, because the Lord Jesus was with him.