

Acts #36
Ambassador In Chains
Acts 26:1-32

In our last study of Acts we looked at Paul's witness before Felix and Drusilla. But Felix put off his decision to do what he knew was right. It was not long before Felix was recalled to Rome by the emperor who heard numerous complaints against him. On arriving at Rome, the governor was tried before the emperor and was acquitted, but he was not allowed to return to his position as the governor of Judea. Porcius Festus was sent out to take over the territory of Judea. The character and conduct of this man was greatly superior to those of his predecessor. As soon as Festus arrived at Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders informed him about Paul in Caesarea, and asked Festus to bring him to Jerusalem to be tried. The fact was, they hoped to ambush the apostle as he was being carried from Caesarea back to Jerusalem. We cannot be sure whether the governor knew the motives of the accusers of Paul, but he refused to grant their request. According to Acts 25:1-5 he decided that Paul should be kept at Caesarea.

When he returned to Caesarea the Jewish leaders soon came to bring charges against the apostle. The record of that trial is found in Acts 25:6-12. The accusations were much the same as those brought before Felix. The governor recognized that there was no real basis for the charges directed against the apostle. He should have acquitted him, but he was too politically minded. He did not yield to the Jews' full request, but he did consent to bringing Paul to Jerusalem if Paul was willing to go. His question in verse 10 was a treacherous one, put from a bad motive – to please the Jews; and it was subjecting the prisoner to a new trial and for the same unproved accusations. This was a violation of the basic principle of law that a man should not stand trial twice for the same crime. Paul sensed some motive on the Jews' part and refused to submit to this injustice, and replied in verse 11, "I appeal to Caesar."

The apostle's life was a stake, and he would not be the victim of injustice. As a Roman citizen, he had the right to demand a trial before the emperor himself. If he were pronounced guilty there, he would have no complaint. He does not beg off from death, but he does demand that which is rightfully his – an unbiased trial before the Empire's highest tribunal. Paul's decision was a wise and necessary one. In the back of his mind, however, there must have been the thought that this was now his best opportunity to reach Rome and preach the Gospel there as he had long hoped for.

Festus must have been surprised at Paul's appeal. But after consulting for a moment with his advisors, he replied as seen in verse 12, "You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you shall go."

While Paul remained in prison awaiting his transfer to Rome, he was called upon to give witness again. Agrippa the king and his sister Bernice arrived in Caesarea and Festus mentioned the strange case of Paul and asked for advice. Agrippa was curious and desired to hear from Paul himself. There must have come to his ears the reports of the provocative ministry of Paul. On a certain day, Paul was called to appear at the court of Festus.

Notice in Acts 25:23 the greatness of the occasion. The court was filled, the governor's hall was filled with important men of the whole area, and the whole atmosphere was charged with pomp and dignity. Into such a setting as that, Paul was brought and given the opportunity of defending himself once again.

Look with me at King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. King Agrippa was the son of Herod who had put James to death. At the death of his father, Agrippa was only seventeen years of age. **Because of his youth, the emperor would not allow him to succeed his father as king over a people so turbulent as the Jews.** Rather, he appointed him over the small kingdom of Chalcis. In a short time, however, he was raised to the place of sovereignty over the territories, which had once been under the control of Phillip and Lysanias.

Bernice was the beautiful daughter of Herod. Although she was Agrippa's own sister she was living with him in an incestuous relationship. She had been married to her uncle, but after his death had begun this sinful attachment to her own brother. **To cover up the scandal, she had married the king of Cilicia but soon left him and returned to her brother's bed.** In later years she became the mistress of Vespasian, the Roman general who directed the siege against the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Also, she lived as the mistress of Titus, the son of Vespasian. **The public sentiment became so great against Titus that he was forced to break off the relationship.** Bernice was noted for her great beauty, but she was simply a high-class harlot.

Even in the defense for his life, Paul was under compulsion to preach the gospel, and we have this truth for us in 1 Corinthians 9:16, "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel." Acts 26:2 gives us Paul's opening words, "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself..." **And he gave his testimony.** See his flashing eyes, hear his vibrant voice, feel the fire in his soul, and you can almost feel the spirit of his message.

Festus, the governor, was standing by and listening, and cried, "Paul, Paul! You have gone crazy. Education has gone to your head and you are losing your mind" (verse 24). **But it was King Agrippa that was feeling the impact of the message of God through Paul.** Paul was bold in his statement, "King Agrippa, God did not hid these things in a corner, but I know that you know and believe the prophets" (verse 27).

The voice of the King must have broken through the silence like the boom of a canon as he said, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” And there the convicted Agrippa speaks for uncounted millions who live, knowing they ought to be saved, but still rejecting God’s mercy, still saying “No,” still on their way to Hell, almost persuaded.

Paul was right, Agrippa did know about the life and death of Christ. This King Agrippa II was the son of Herod Agrippa I who had ordered the death of James the apostle. This man was the great-grandson of the Herod who had ordered the babies killed in Bethlehem after Jesus’ birth.

Paul was right; Agrippa did believe the prophets, for already he had talked with the Sanhedrin about the matters of the law.

Paul was right; Agrippa did know enough to be saved. He stood like the prisoner and Paul like the defense attorney. Yes, Agrippa was almost persuaded, but not quite saved.

If you are in this building tonight and you are not a Christian, it is not because you do not know that you have never heard the gospel. It is not that you do not know that you need to be saved. It is not that you do not feel the drawing of the Holy Spirit. It is simply because you do not want to surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in your life.

Let me remind you that it makes no difference how close you come to being saved, until you have come to the place of serving and accepting the risen Christ you are still lost.

I am reminded of a song that we used to sing:

“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.”

Dr. Jimmy Allen, former pastor of First Baptist Church, San Antonio, Texas gave this statement in the May 1991 issue of Pulpit Helps magazine, "We missed him. Our chance to change things came and passed and we did not know it was there. A dark-skinned little boy sat through Sunday School classes for three years at a great Baptist Church (First Church, San Antonio) but someone missed him. His name was Sirhan Sirhan, and at age 24 he shot and killed Senator Robert Kennedy. In a welter of words and the shudder of grief throughout our nation, the persistent thought keeps recurring...someone missed him."

Opportunities that are not taken advantage of will many times come back to haunt us as people. The greatest tragedy will be for all those who stand before Christ and hear him say, "Depart from me ye workers of iniquity for I never knew you," and to know that they were almost persuaded, they almost accepted Christ.

Paul had shared the words of life. King Agrippa stood in the face of the greatest decision of his entire life and said, "No." Paul was not responsible for the outcome; just to be faithful to the opportunity that God had given him. God does not judge us on how many people are saved because of our witness, just on our faithfulness.

If you are not saved, why not come tonight?