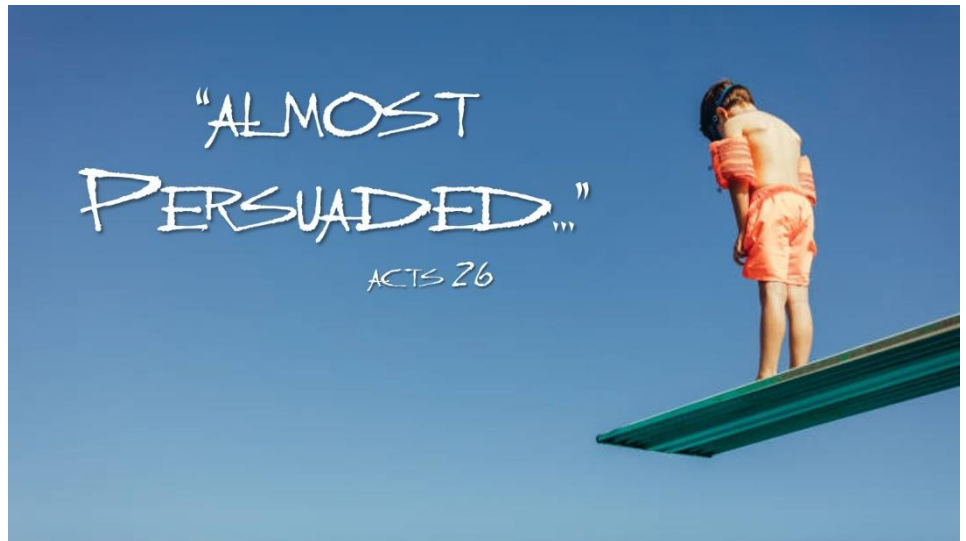


“Almost Persuaded”

- Acts 26 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson
at JF Believers Church
in Menomonie, Wisc
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Acts 26 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? 9 "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 "This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. 11 "And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. 12 "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 13 "at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 "And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 "So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 16 'But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. 17 'I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 18 'to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.' 19 "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." 24 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."

Chapter 26

Back in the old days of the coffeehouse...when I was still the coffee pastor at our down town location, there was this kid who used to hang around in there and would always sit at the counter. I can still hear him say “Indecision kills squirrels.” That always amused me, and its greater truth was not lost on me. What gets me is not the fact we as human beings can hang in indecision, but more over how *long* we can remain in such a place...sometimes for a lifetime, or at least a great share of it.

The poet and author Emily Dickenson once commented “*I was almost persuaded to be a Christian. I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly. But I soon forgot my morning prayer or else it was irksome to me. One by one my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever.*”

The apostle Paul stood before the King Agrippa that day and he told of the account that had occurred on the Damascus Road so many years prior. The day that changed everything. The day when Saul died. The day Paul was made alive from the dead.

Last week we spoke of the tendency to procrastinate in our lives, both secular and spiritual. But what King Agrippa spoke of speaks into our lives in an even greater manner.

Certainly everyone is capable of marginal shifts of thinking and behavior in their living. They can change their practices and on some level the dynamic of their lives. Many of us do it all the time. We better ourselves through greater education, a new vocation, or getting in better physical condition and losing some weight. All of these things have varying degrees of the bettering of our lives, but none will save you, and none will bring you back from the dead.

Colossians 2:13, NLT: "*You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.*"

Much of what we do in the realm of faith belief tends to revolve around decisions and efforts toward bettering our state and quality of life. These decisions involve a multitude of judgements and resolutions...often daily, as we subtly move back and forth across the Christian spectrum according to how we feel about each decision. But for Paul...*post Damascus road*, every decision was "what does my Redeemer want of me"...both as He speaks to me in the Spirit, and what he has already instructed and directed in His Word. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says "...*whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*" Is that our baseline? Is that the all-encompassing mandate which affects our next step and every step thereafter?

When we hear that word "mandate" we can tend to bristle. We can often feel that church and the pastorate is always pushing us...pushing us to make this decision or to choose that direction. Getting up in our face and telling us we're bad people and we need to straighten our lives out. But let me make this clear: nothing could be further from what I am trying to accomplish! You can't be a Christian that way, and I wouldn't want you to think you can. The only way the things that come forth from this pulpit can ever be a reality in your life...let alone a joyful one, is that you have to die and come back to life.

Paul spoke of these worldly attempts to rise to the occasion and to have a "better life." In verses 4 – 5 he spoke saying "*As the Jewish leaders are well aware, I was given a thorough Jewish training from my earliest childhood among my own people and in Jerusalem. If they would admit it, they know that I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest sect of our religion.*" Paul was obviously a man of bold personal determination. He made decisions. He changed his life. He acted and moved and bettered his life. Yet the life that God wanted for him, he still did not know.

We all can simply decide to live with greater morals, or we can change our use of time and priorities. We can decide that having some God and church in our living is a good thing and practicing some good works is advantageous to our passing existence. But what you can't do, is do as Paul spoke concerning that Damascus road experience, you cannot make a dead man alive through your efforts...and that is what both Christ and Paul is speaking concerning. Paul had it all...the "good life" ...the religious life...good standing amongst those in the religious world...but he did not have life. Real life. New Life. Life grand and life eternal.

In fact, despite all of his improvements, Jesus still told him that he (Paul) was actually persecuting Him. Persecuting Christ! Despite all of his decisions, education, religious efforts and improvements, he still was on the wrong side of Christ.

How many of us have followed in those footsteps? We have decided for some level of church participation, but our commitment is fragile and vulnerable. We have learned scripture and have decided that we believe and will adhere to this part and that part, and have quietly decided that this aspect or another is not for me and has been summarily rejected. We cheer the component of love within the fellowship community, until we decide that something or someone else is offering us more comfort, more ease, and more support for our lifestyle, and then that love is abandoned because it was never the love true salvation brings. We practice our faith decisions until they get hard, uncomfortable, or is an affront to our emotional priorities. All of which leads us to then “decide” to turn back. Oh no...not a rejection of all our previous decisions and an abandonment of religion. Just away from discomfort and difficulty...back to a more comfortable island. And so we spend our lives in the ebb and flow of emotion and fluid decisions. And it all is eternally meaningless, because it is all an effort to be right with God through our own doings. Our own decisions. Our own wisdom and righteousness. But unless we have indeed had that Damascus Road experience then we have no righteousness whatsoever.

Yet that is not Paul’s story. What occurred on that road that day was literally a transformation. His account went on throughout the events of Acts, being persecuted, hunted, beaten, marginalized, and experiencing hardships. Yet he reflects with great accuracy and a staunchly entrenched spirit saying *“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.”* For Paul, his life was no longer his own, so how **could** he walk away? Yet how often we respond to Christ as Peter in Acts 10:14 saying “oh **no, Lord...**” But when we say no, he’s not our Lord and we are negate the “new life” that is to be the reality in our life. That is not meant to be a threat or a mandate from Jesus or from me today, but rather simply a fact. A reality of the position of coming back to life as a new and different person.

The idea of repentance that Paul spoke of in verse 20 was no doubt a new spiritual concept to the attendees that day. Folks were and *are* ok with the idea of “religion.” When perceived as man’s attempt to “better himself” or a moralistic community club, everything is fine with those of the opposite camp. But to be told one must “repent” was another matter. To insinuate that I must acknowledge my sinful state, receive Jesus Christ as not just my Savior but as my Lord, and die to my old life and now live unto *His* life....well, that is a whole other issue. One quite different than religion!

Agrippa stood at the threshold of life. Step through, and his life would never be the same again. What was it that drew Agrippa to that threshold? Perhaps it was the incredulous scene before him. This man Paul had had the “world by the tail” and gave it up. A man who, by the world’s standards, had had it all! Wealth, power, position! But he had given it all up for this “Jesus.” He had walked away from all of it to join and even lead those who he once persecuted and killed for that belief. Now he was “one of them.” And now—despite the persecutions, imprisonment, beatings and stonings—Paul was undeterred. The king must have been mystified. How about you?

Perhaps the reason our witness and testimony has such little effect in the mission God has placed us in is because we are expressing with our lives a version of Christianity that speaks of a model of making good decisions and bettering oneself to achieve some Christian ‘bar.’ Paul set the world on its head because he had seemingly died and came back to life. “Back to life” as someone else. Back to a life

that was no longer his. A life where he no longer made daily decisions of how far, how much, and what about me? It was all Jesus and what was good for Him, manifested His glory and furthered His kingdom. No one does that on their own...decision by decision...effort by effort. It is only done when one dies and is reborn a different person... reborn a child of God.

Does that kind of radical change and unflinching commitment make you stand back in wonder? Maybe because you have yet to ever experience the Damascus road, and ever know that level of unswerving dedication that comes after. For Paul it was not an ideal or a goal, it was his reality of transformation. Psalms 62:5-8 says “*My soul, wait silently for God alone, For my expectation is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory; The rock of my strength, And my refuge, is in God. Trust in Him at all times, you people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us.*”

As long as I believe that I still have options...that I still get to choose what is best in my mind, I am not a new creature but rather simply embracing a religious self-improvement plan.

“Almost.” The king was “**almost** persuaded.” **Almost** a Christian... But *almost* was and *is* never enough! For hell will be full of those who were “almost” Christians. People who sat in church weekly, tithed, and served. Lost because while they “decided” they were going to be a spiritual and religious person, they never actually surrendered their very lives. They never died to who they were before. They just sought to fit God into their own plans and dreams and goals. The “I don’t want to do that” ruled their lives. The “I want Jesus, but I still want, need, have to have xyz” made it clear as to who was calling the shots.

I would not want to leave this message with anyone thinking that I speak of a level of perfection that would rule us all out of the game. I am a living sacrifice, and the problem with a living sacrifice is that it sometimes wiggles off of the altar! But a stumble...an error...*a sin*, does not say you are not a new creature. But to *stay there*...to make a move and find rest in a decision that is in conflict with scripture...conflict with Christ’s body the church...conflict with the spiritual glorification of Christ despite whatever discomfort it brings...well, that is another matter altogether. That says that you are still the old you, and not a new creature. It says you have never experienced the dramatic change out on the Damascus Road. It says that while you may *believe* that Christianity is the right path, you have never surrendered the control of your life...the hardest thing you will ever do. It says that you are...like King Agrippa, *almost a Christian*...”