

The Tragedy of The Almost

Text: Acts 26:13-32

There is no record that a more convenient season ever came for Felix. He trembled with conviction and did not respond to accept Christ as Savior. The testimony of Stephen records his words just before he was stoned, reflecting the disconsolation when rejection of the Gospel takes place. Acts 7:51: "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye." The rejection of Felix as well the rejection of Stephen's crowd brings to light the understanding that there is such a thing as resistible grace.

Felix's procrastination was not only reflective in the way he kept Paul incarcerated for two years, but due to the upheaval in Judea and his incompetence in the face of crisis, he was replaced by Festus as the new governor in 59 AD.

As we move into the 25th chapter of Acts we see that the high priest and Jewish leaders are trying to persuade the new governor to send Paul back to Jerusalem under the guise to be tried, but in reality, they intended for him to be intercepted by an assassination squad. Festus, trying to be diplomatic in pleasing the Jews in Jerusalem, brings before Paul the prospect of being tried in Jerusalem. The quick-thinking Paul appealed rather to be judged by Caesar, which required him to be brought to Rome—Paul's goal anyway. In the meantime, Herod Agrippa and his wife Bernice came to visit Festus curious about Paul and requested to hear his case. So, once again, Paul has an opportunity to give his remarkable testimony. Festus sat in on the hearing and after Paul had spoken his testimony and closing out with the Gospel, Festus interrupted. Acts 26:24: "And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad." I love Paul's response in Acts 26:25: "But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness." In debates when one doesn't have an answer, he calls names. And it seems that even Festus must have been under conviction since he did not have an answer. Festus raises his voice calling Paul crazy yet still recognizing that Paul was highly educated.

Then we come to the key verse of our study this morning. Acts 26:28: "Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

1. THE TRAGEDY OF THE ALMOST IN THE MATTER OF LIFE ITSELF

Judges 19:26, 27

There are a few stories in the Bible that are unpleasant beyond comprehension. This is one of them. This poor woman having suffered sad sadistic abuse is trying to find rescue and help and yet died with her "...hands upon the threshold...." (Judges 19:27) of prospective deliverance.

Years ago, there was a group of men who were attempting to ascend Mount Washington and stand upon her summit. They were caught in a horrendous blizzard. Their goal then became to get into the Summit House and receive protection from the storm. But exhausted they stopped short and froze to death in what was discovered on a clear day to be within sight of the house. Due to the blinding snow, they did not know. They almost made it!

William L. Hyatt was a miner who had gone to visit relatives in Los Angeles. On the way back home through the Mojave Desert, his car broke down. He had one canteen that soon was depleted in his 22-mile hike through the desert with temperatures up to 120 degrees. A couple of other miners found his empty car and then began to trace his steps to find him. The last 10 miles told the story. They could see the footprints, first go one direction, then another. Then they saw where he had fallen and began to crawl. They could see where he was pulling up mesquite bushes to try to get moisture from their roots. Finally, Mr. Hyatt collapsed and died at the base of a ridge. Just beyond the ridge, less than half a mile were the refreshing waters of Saratoga Springs. So close, but so far away!

2. THE TRAGEDY OF THE ALMOST IN GOD'S PERFECT WILL

Deuteronomy 1:24-26

The children of Israel came to the very border of the Promised Land. They even held the delicious fruits of Canaan in their hands. No doubt, they even tasted of the fruit, but they refused to possess their possessions.

John Greenleaf Whittier recorded the angst of missed opportunities from his poem of a maiden and judge who lost their opportunity to love and wed:

Alas for maiden, alas for Judge,
For rich repiner and household drudge!
God pity them both! and pity us all,
Who vainly the dreams of youth recall.
For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: "It might have been!"

Twelve spies went into Canaan. Only Joshua and Caleb were willing to take the land God had promised them. The other ten spies were preoccupied with the size of the giants and their belief that they could not conquer them. Numbers 13:30, 31: "And Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it. But the men that went up with him said, We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we." And thus the penalty for missing God's original purpose was 40 years in the wilderness.

3. THE TRAGEDY OF THE ALMOST IN THE MATTER OF SALVATION

Mark 10:17-22

It is interesting to note as the young man was listing off the commandments, he left off Exodus 20:17a: "Thou shalt not covet...." Mark 10:21: "Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me." It appears that Jesus hit the root of the problem because the Bible went on to say in the next verse, "And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions" (Mark 10:22). The rich young ruler was so close to salvation but came just one thing short. Luke 12:15: "And He said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

Conclusion:

Acts 24:25: "And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee."

Acts 26:28: "Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." We never hear of Felix having the convenient season or that Agrippa was ever persuaded. Written in the annals of time is the tragedy of the almost.

Aaron Burr, Jr. served as Vice President under Thomas Jefferson. He was the son of Aaron Burr, Sr., second president of Princeton. One of the great ironies is that he was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards. He is perhaps best known as the man who took the life of Alexander Hamilton in a duel. When Burr was a young man, he fell under conviction to be saved. Before making a decision, he went to a cleric who advised him not to make a decision yet, wait until some calm Sunday morning and then make your decision. Aaron Burr was still troubled. He went to a preacher who was of the persuasion of Grandfather Edwards, who said, "Aaron, while God is dealing with you, decide now before it's too late." Riding the horns of dilemma, Aaron walked down the stairs of the old preacher's manse, lifted his fist toward the heavens and said, "God, if you just leave me alone, I'll leave you alone!" The unhappy decades for Burr went by, until one day while taking an evening carriage ride, he slowed his horses to a stop upon hearing the Gospel singing coming from a church house. A young man noticing Burr left the church building, approached Aaron Burr and inquired if he was a Christian. The answer from Burr was chilling. He said, "Young man, when I was your age, I had a desire to come to Jesus and become a Christian. Then he finished, "I have never had that desire again."

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.

-Pastor Pope-