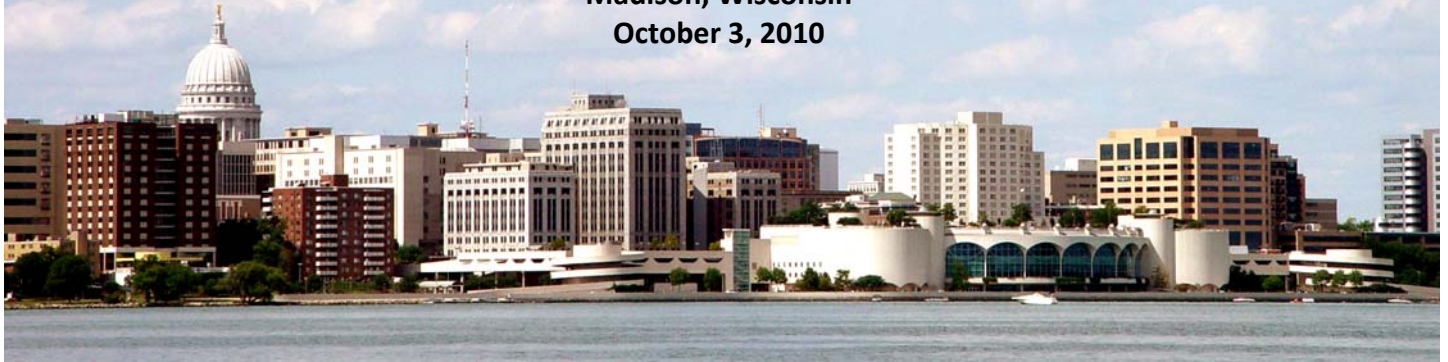


# ***“Almost Persuaded”***

**Acts 26**

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Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
October 3, 2010**



## **Introduction:**

As most of us know, the word ***“Christian”*** is found only three times in the entire Bible. I will let you find the first and the third reference, but this morning I would like for us to consider the second time that the word ***“Christian”*** is found in the Bible, a passage in Acts 26 where King Agrippa says to Paul, ***“In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.”*** In order to really understand what is going on, we need to consider the events leading up to this passage.

Earlier in the book of Acts, in Acts 21, Paul returns from his Third Missionary Journey and he comes back to visit the temple in Jerusalem. However, after a few days, the Jews from Asia who had been following Paul and tormenting him on his journeys, finally catch up to him, and they make the false accusation that Paul had defiled the temple by bringing a Gentile into the temple itself. For those of you who are familiar with the temple, you know that the large outer area is known as the “Court of the Gentiles,” a very large open area where basically anybody could go. However, on the diagram, you will notice what the artist has labeled as a “balustrade” [bal-uh-strade], basically a fence or a railing. That fence was the dividing line, a barrier that Gentiles were not allowed to cross. Several years ago, I was able to go to the Jewish Museum in Cleveland, and they had a part of that wall on display. It was a stone maybe 18” tall by 24” wide and about 8” thick with a rather ominous-sounding inscription. The stone was a sign, and the display at the museum explained that these signs were posted at regular intervals all around the temple. The wording was posted in Latin and in Hebrew, they explained that the original stones were painted white with red lettering (to make it really stand out), and translated into English the sign said this, ***“No man of another nation is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the temple. And whoever is caught will have himself to blame for the death that ensues.”*** The Jews, therefore, were extremely uptight about making sure that no Gentiles crossed that line. Well, the Jews from Asia came along and accused Paul of taking a Gentile across that line. Luke, the author of Acts, explains the situation in Acts 21:29, ***“For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.”*** I know it has been a while since we have studied Acts in the Wednesday evening adult class, but for those of you who may remember the A,B,C’s of Acts, Chapter 21 is represented by the letter U, “Uproar in Jerusalem.” The Bible tells us that as a result of that accusation, the Jewish people seize Paul and dragged him out of the temple. They were getting ready to kill him on the spot, but at the last moment, the Roman commander looks down from the fortress that was

overlooking the temple, he sees what is about to happen, and he rushes down with his soldiers and arrests Paul, basically saving his life.

In Acts 22-23, Paul is allowed to make his defense to the Jews, but their conclusion is that Paul should not be allowed to live. In fact, the situation starts to get violent again, so the commander brings Paul back into the barracks. That night, the Lord appeared to Paul and stood by him and said (in Acts 23:11), ***“Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”*** Very interesting! In the meantime, the Jews are plotting to kill Paul, the commander learns of the plot, and he has Paul removed from Jerusalem and taken to Caesarea under heavy guard—200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen, late at night. Caesarea is a seaport town, home of the Roman governor, Felix. The Jerusalem commander sends a letter to Felix, and if I may summarize the letter, the commander basically says, “I don’t know what to do with this guy! He is a Roman citizen, his own people are trying to kill him, as far as I can tell he’s done nothing deserving death...so you deal with it!” Felix, therefore, conducts a trial in Acts 24, but he holds off on a verdict. He delays (according to Acts 24:26), hoping that Paul will give him a bribe. Two years go by, and suddenly Felix is replaced by a new governor, a man by the name of Festus. As you can imagine, as soon as Festus takes over, the Jews press for a new trial, the Jews want the trial to be held in Jerusalem, and Festus (wanting to keep the Jews happy) gives that option to Paul. But Paul (knowing that a trial in Jerusalem will not end well) tosses it back to Festus and basically says, “If I do not deserve to die, and if you will not let me go free, then I appeal to Caesar.” Every Roman citizen had that right. Festus, though, now has a much bigger problem: How does he explain this whole mess to Caesar? Here is a Roman citizen who has been held for two years for no good reason, “I can send this guy to Caesar, but how do I explain it? I don’t even know what the charges are! There is no legal reason for this man to even be a prisoner!”

Today, we would say that Paul had become a political hot potato. He had become the “Ground-Zero Mosque” of his day, a problem with no good solution. And so at this point, King Agrippa shows up to welcome Festus as the new governor. Agrippa was the king appointed by the Romans to rule the whole area. Festus talks to Agrippa, and he tries to explain some of the background in the last part of Acts 25, and in verse 19 Festus boils it down and says that as far as he is concerned it all goes back to some kind of religious dispute concerning a dead man named Jesus whom Paul claimed to be alive. Well, King Agrippa wanted to hear more about this. On the next day, there was a huge ceremony, and on that grand occasion in the presence of all of the important government officials (imagine the inauguration of a new president here in our nation), Festus the new governor decides that he will bring in Paul so that King Agrippa can hear Paul for himself and perhaps give some advice concerning what to tell the Emperor about this whole mess with the apostle Paul. With that, we come to Acts 26. In our pew Bibles, the passage starts on page 1751. If you will, please look with me at Acts 26...

<sup>1</sup> ***Agrippa said to Paul, “You are permitted to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense:*** <sup>2</sup> ***“In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today;*** <sup>3</sup> ***especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.*** <sup>4</sup> ***“So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem;*** <sup>5</sup> ***since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.*** <sup>6</sup> ***“And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers;*** <sup>7</sup> ***the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews.*** <sup>8</sup> ***“Why is it considered incredible among you people if God***

does raise the dead?"<sup>9</sup> "So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>10</sup> "And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them."<sup>11</sup> "And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities."<sup>12</sup> "While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests,"<sup>13</sup> at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me."<sup>14</sup> "And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'<sup>15</sup> "And I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.'<sup>16</sup> "But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you;"<sup>17</sup> rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you,"<sup>18</sup> to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.'<sup>19</sup> "So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision,"<sup>20</sup> but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance."<sup>21</sup> "For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death."<sup>22</sup> "So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place;"<sup>23</sup> that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."

<sup>24</sup> While Paul was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad."<sup>25</sup> But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth."<sup>26</sup> "For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner."<sup>27</sup> "King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do."<sup>28</sup> Agrippa replied to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian."<sup>29</sup> And Paul said, "I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains."<sup>30</sup> The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them,"<sup>31</sup> and when they had gone aside, they began talking to one another, saying, "This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment."<sup>32</sup> And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

This morning, as we study this powerful chapter, I realize that there are many people who were there, but I would like for us to focus our attention on the two main characters, and then I would like for us to apply this chapter to a decision that all of us are facing today.

I. And as we begin, the first main character here is obviously the APOSTLE PAUL.

We do not have the time to go through Paul's defense line-by-line, but one thing we notice is that Paul is not really defending himself. Here is Paul standing before the king, this king is trying to determine the charges before sending Paul to Rome for trial, and Paul is not defending himself. Remember: The original charge (way back in Acts 21) was that Paul had taken a Gentile across the barrier into the temple where Gentiles were forbidden. But we notice here that Paul makes no reference to the original charge, he doesn't say, "I didn't do it," but instead, Paul uses this grand occasion as an opportunity to preach the good news about Jesus Christ. In fact, the whole speech is tied to the resurrection. Paul starts by summarizing his past, how he had come from the strictest party of the Jewish religion, he had been a Pharisee. But in verse 6, he says that he is on trial because of the ***"hope in the promise made by God to our fathers."*** And the hope he is referring to is the hope that God raises the dead. In verse 8, in fact, Paul opens it up and uses the plural of ***"you"*** and says, ***"Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"*** In other words, even the Gentiles in the audience have at least some belief in the possibility of resurrection. And that is what Paul is arguing here. He is on trial because of his ***"hope in the promise made by God to our fathers."*** He is on trial for his belief in the resurrection, a hope that is shared by nearly every culture all around the world. Paul, then, is saying to King Agrippa, "You believe in the resurrection. You have hoped for the resurrection. We all believe in the resurrection. Even the pagans here today believe in the resurrection. And I am simply preaching the good news about a man who has made the resurrection possible."

Paul, then, goes on to talk about meeting the Lord (alive) on the road to Damascus. And from that point on (according to verse 18), Paul was commissioned to open the eyes of those in darkness, to turn them from darkness to light, to turn them from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness and a place among God's people. And at that point, Paul made it his life's mission to preach repentance (in verse 20), and to encourage people to perform deeds in keeping with their repentance.

## II. Well, that is Paul's part in all of this, which now brings us to KING AGRIPPA.

Agrippa's full title was King Herod Agrippa II, and to say that this man had a family history would be a serious understatement. His great-grandfather was Herod the Great, the king who intercepted the wise men and used the information to kill all of the baby boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to murder Jesus as a child—that's this guy's great-grandpa! Agrippa's great uncle was Herod Antipas, the man who was married to his brother's wife, a relationship that was challenged by John the Immerser. It was this man, Agrippa's great uncle, who watched his niece dance seductively and expressed his appreciation by giving her John's head on a platter. It was this same great uncle who was in Jerusalem for the Passover when Jesus was crucified—he is the one who interviewed Jesus before sending Him back to Pilate. Agrippa's father is mentioned in Acts 12—Herod Agrippa I, the king who had James the Apostle executed, the king who would have killed Peter if the angel had not intervened, the same king who accepted the worship of the people and then died as he was eaten by worms at the hands of an angel. King Agrippa, therefore, had a long family history that was deeply opposed to the Christian faith. As I see it, this is why Paul pointed out everything that he had also done to oppose the Christian faith. Paul is saying to King Agrippa, I know you have a long family history of opposing the Christian faith, but so do I! It wasn't my great-grandfather, it wasn't my great-uncle, it wasn't my father, it was me—I personally persecuted the church; but I changed, and so can you!"

I point this out to tell us at least a little bit about some of what might be going through the king's mind as he listens to Paul. Not only does he have a long family history (as Paul does), but we also know from secular history that Agrippa's wife, Bernice, is actually also his sister. So here is this powerful king with a long family history, he is married to his sister, and he is listening to the apostle Paul talk about repentance and the

resurrection, and here is his sister sitting right next to him as a very visible reminder that his life is not right with God. Have any of us ever been in that situation? Have we ever had the feeling that the preacher was talking directly to us? I know I've been in that situation! It is not a comfortable place to be, but sometimes it is necessary. And so Paul gets to the point where he turns directly to King Agrippa and he says, ***"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do."***

III. **And that brings us to the main idea of this morning's lesson as PAUL CALLS ON ALL OF US (INCLUDING KING AGRIPPA) TO MAKE A DECISION CONCERNING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.**

***"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do."*** And with that, Paul was asking King Agrippa to come down on one side or the other, to make a firm commitment. My understanding of the word ***"know"*** here is that Paul had more than a feeling, but that there was something Paul could observe on this occasion that caused him to know that King Agrippa believed. Perhaps Paul could see the sweat beading up on Agrippa's forehead, perhaps Paul could watch Agrippa's feet shifting, perhaps Paul could see Agrippa's eyes getting wider, perhaps Paul could see the nervous glances. You know, people don't always know this, but preachers can actually see a lot of what goes on during the sermon on Sunday morning!

And so the argument is: You know the prophets (I know that you do), and you know something about the life of Christ (these things have not been done in a corner), so put these two together and do something about it! And here is King Agrippa, sitting there on his throne right next to his sister-wife, and he is just squirming! He is facing an uncomfortable dilemma: 1.) He can deny the prophets (and be utterly rejected by the Jewish establishment), or 2.) He can become a Christian (and become extremely unpopular with his Jewish nation). To King Agrippa, it is obvious that Paul is not insane—as Paul said, his words are true and reasonable—and so King Agrippa is faced with a huge decision. The only logical conclusion is to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, to repent of his sins, to turn from darkness to light, to become a Christian. And here we have it: The second time that the word "Christian" is ever found in the Bible. A Christian is someone who is loyal to Christ, someone who holds to the teaching of Christ. Herod, then, uses the term and says to Paul, ***"In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian."*** Herod could see where this was heading, and he could see that he was right there on the edge.

But of course, as we know, being close to becoming a Christian is not the same as actually being a Christian. In Mark 16:16, the Bible does not say, "He who has believed and has almost been baptized shall be saved." In Acts 2:38, Peter did not say, "Repent, and each of you be almost baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." In Romans 6:3-4, Paul did not say that "...all of us who have almost been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death." He did not say that we have "...almost been buried with Him through baptism into death." In each of these cases, almost is not enough. To be almost saved is to be lost. To be almost saved is like almost putting your parachute on. To be almost saved is a little like almost having the safety net in place before jumping off a ride up in the Dells. Almost can make the difference between life and death.

But the point here is that each person must decide. Maybe you are here this morning and there is nothing in the Bible that you really disagree with. Maybe it all sounds pretty good. You are not like Governor Festus—you do not think that we have lost our minds because of what we believe. I don't think you would be here if that were the case. And so our goal is the same as Paul's: Our prayer to God is that all who hear this message would choose to obey the gospel.

**Conclusion:**

With King Agrippa, we do not know what happened. We do know that Agrippa, Bernice, and Festus all got up and discussed the situation briefly. They agreed that Paul had done nothing wrong and that he would have been set free if he had not already appealed to Caesar. And in the very next chapter, Paul is put on a ship bound for Rome.

And so the lesson comes back to us: Each of us must decide whether we are willing to believe the Scriptures, whether we are willing to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and whether we are willing to do something about it. The Bible teaches that we must turn away from sin and that we must allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we would be glad to study the Scriptures with you this afternoon or sometime this week. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)