

(Jesus said to Paul) I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

"So then, King Agrippa, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles." (Paul continued) "What I am saying is true and reasonable. I am convinced that none of this has escaped your notice, because it was not done in a corner.

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to be a Christian"

Paul replied, "Short time or long--I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

The year is 2012. You are at the summer Olympics in Sydney. You are in the swimming venue and Michael Phelps is going for a record 8 gold medals. He has 6 already. He's in the 200 breast-stroke. Phelps and the Czech swimmer are neck and neck—in fact, Phelps is a tick behind. They touch the wall and it seems Phelps has lost. But the TV camera and photo-electric beam show that Phelps won—by .01 hundredth of a second! The Czech almost won a gold medal. He almost beat Michael Phelps.

But almost is not enough. Unlike horse-shoes and hand-grenades, in our reading and in our personal faith, 'Almost' is NOT enough.

As Paul stands before King Agrippa, he begins by describing his life B.C.—'before Christ'. ***"I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself. I beg you to hear me patiently. My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. I lived according to the strictest sect of our religion, a Pharisee."***

Paul was a Hebrew by birth, and a Roman citizen. His Jewish roots led him to study under Gamaliel, one of the greatest Jewish rabbis ever. He was a Pharisee. Pharisees were the theological conservatives of their day. They dotted every theological "i"; they crossed every theological "t." Anyone who knew Paul would have said, without question, that Paul was going to heaven.

"Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison... and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them."

Paul shifts the conversation from his past before he met the Lord, to his experience of meeting the risen Christ. ***"As I journeyed to Damascus, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He***

said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.' But Paul was literally and figuratively knocked off his high horse.

With one question: "**Who are you Lord?**" and with one answer: "**I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,**" Paul's religion collapsed like a house of cards! He finally realized he did not need religion, he needed redemption. He did not need Judaism, he needed Jesus. He did not need the law, he needed the Lord. He did not need a synagogue, he needed a Savior. Paul was instructed in the Christian faith. He then was chosen by God to proclaim Jesus courageously in a scary world. He had courage in Christ.

Well, with revelation came revolution! Paul had seen a new light. He was now under a new Lord, filled with a new love. Now there are skeptics who say that Paul was simply afflicted with sunstroke. Well, they were right if you change one letter. It was a Son-stroke, rather than a sunstroke! He was a changed man; not just from the outside in, but from the inside out. Somewhat like a man in China in June of 1989.

After six weeks of protesting against the communist regime, a student-led democracy movement filled Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China. In response, the Chinese leadership carried out swift carnage. As many as 10,000 protestors were massacred.

The following day, to reinforce the government's zero-tolerance policy, a column of tanks rumbled through the Square in an effort to dissuade any renewed protests. The message was clear: "The campaign for democracy is over!" Thousands of mournful onlookers lined the route, but gave a wide berth to the intimidating armored behemoths.

Suddenly, one lone protestor, carrying only a shopping bag, walked to the front of the column, causing the tanks to stop. For a moment, it was a standoff. As the lead tank tried maneuvering around the protestor, the man shifted his position to block it. The tank veered again, and was blocked again. Then again. And again. The man refused to yield.

Eventually, the tank shut off its engine and the lone protestor climbed onto the lead tank to talk to the soldiers inside. The conversation lasted only a few minutes. Soon, several onlookers pulled the man from the tank. To this day, no one knows who the protestor was, nor if those who pulled him aside were friend or foe. The conversation with the tank commander was never divulged.

However, photojournalists from around the globe were there, and their pictures of *Man vs. Tank* went viral to a worldwide audience. The unknown protestor – whom the press dubbed *Tank Man* – became an instant symbol of courage and defiance. In fact, *Time* magazine listed the *Tank Man* as "*One of the Most Important People of the 20th Century.*" The widely circulated images of him stopping those tanks are some of the most iconic pictures of all time.

Tank Man's courage came from his fight for political freedom. Today, our fight has even higher stakes—eternal lives are at stake.

Often, people equate *courage* with *fearlessness*. Scripture gives even greater definition. The New Testament word for *courage* is *tolmao* – a Greek word used 16 times to describe courage in both life *and* ministry. In English, *tolmao* translates to:

- 1) To gather up courage – as when Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the privilege of burying the crucified body of Jesus. (Mk 15.43)
- 2) To be bold – as when Paul challenged the false teachings and deceitful workers in Corinth who disguised themselves as believers. (2Cor 11.13, 21)

3) To dare – as when Paul spoke of someone who's willing to die for someone else ... as Jesus did for us. (Rom 5.7-8)

Courage can't be assigned in a church council meeting nor legislated by the elders. Sometimes even pastors feel woefully inadequate to storm the gates of hell ... even with *the Truth*.

Paul is a picture of every person born into this world. Paul was not born a believer in Jesus Christ; he had to become one. No one is born a Christian—you must receive the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit, through Word and Sacraments, to become a Christian.

Like Paul, you may take pride in your religious background. But Paul had to realize what you need to realize, which is being born into a religious family or raised in a church does not make you a Christian anymore than being born in a garage makes you an automobile. We are all born in unbelief. Before we receive Christ, it's necessary to understand our condition before Christ, which was separated from God, lost in sin, and in need of forgiveness.

There is a tombstone in Scotland on which are carved these words about a man named Angus McDonald: "He was not a particularly religious man, but in all other respects he was an ideal churchman." How do you do that--be an ideal churchman without being particularly religious? I am not sure exactly, but I suspect that could be said of many who fill the pews of Christendom. Almost.

Do you almost know Jesus Christ? Almost realize that your righteousness is of no use in being saved; Do you sort-of understand that Jesus Christ died on the cross and was raised from the dead to pay for your sins? Have you kind-a repented of your sins and by faith received Christ? Are you an 'almost' believer?

Every Christian has been converted or else he is not a Christian! Like Paul, any Christian can simply, through the power of the Holy Spirit, tell his story of conversion; how he came to know Christ as Savior and as Lord.

My classmates and I went to an museum where they had a pendulum. The guide asked us if we believed in gravity. We said we did. He asked the toughest guy to stand an inch away from the pendulum as it was raised to six feet. The guide released the pendulum, but the guy couldn't stop from flinching as it swung back. He 'almost' believed it wouldn't hit him on return swing.

Paul was a prisoner, true. But he was also hoping to take these men captive for the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, that's the very reason that Jesus saved him. "***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.***"

Paul had been given a specific assignment. He was literally saved to share. His job was to go to every person that he possibly could get to without Christ, "***to open their eyes and 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.***"

Our job as a witness for Christ is to simply tell the truth about Him; share our testimony and then call people to repentance, redemption, and righteousness. We testified to that faith at our own confirmation. We made promises.

Notice very carefully that it all begins with repentance. Just as we recount our existence as a sinner before Christ, we must confront others with the fact of their own sinfulness. In short, you cannot get a person saved until they understand they are lost. Martin Luther was right when he said, "The ultimate proof of the sinner is that he doesn't want to know his own sin; our job is to make him see it and then to see his Savior."

"Agrippa said to Paul, 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian.'" (v.28) He didn't like to or want to admit he needed anyone or anything else. He was a king. He was in charge. He would not bow before anyone, even God.

You have not been saved just to sit in church, or to soak up truth, or to sing in a choir, or even to send missionaries into the world. You've been saved; then you want to share.

Every true Christian has in his heart perhaps the single most powerful tool available to be an effective witness for Christ—personal faith. That is all Paul had as he stood before a king in Acts 26; and it was all he needed. Like Paul, we just tell people what makes you come here on Sunday morning and park yourself in a pew. Tell them what Jesus has done, is doing and will do for you.

Do you remember your confirmation vows? Have you remained strong and steadfast in your faith. Would you still "suffer all—even death—than fall away from Jesus? Do you still receive that joyous feeling when you receive HC? Is Christ still strong in your heart? Or have you slipped into the 'almost' category?

It may be true that the average person on the street has no real clue what a real Christian really is. Many who profess to be Christians really are not Christians at all and many who use the term don't even really understand what they mean by it. Are you a Christian 'cuz you were raised in a Christian home? Cuz you attended a Christian school? Cuz you were confirmed in a Christian church? Cuz you live by Christian principles? Those are certainly laudable, but one thing alone makes you a Christian. These things may mark a Christian, but they do not make a Christian.

There is a difference between being a Christian in name and being a Christian in nature. What makes you a Christian is faith in Christ Jesus. Not almost, but total and personal. Agrippa could have had that. But, almost got in the way. He could be singing with the angels today, but now he only cries out in agony. All, because of almost. He could have had the pleasures of Heaven, but all he has is the pain of hell. Almost saved, but ultimately lost.

Someone has observed that there are only two kinds of Christians in this world: Those who talk about the lost. Those who talk to the lost. Which one are you?

Someone has observed that there are only two kinds of Christians in this world: Those who talk about the lost. Those who talk to the lost. Which one are you? There's too much at stake for us to lose our courage. Let's swallow hard, step out of our safety zone, challenge those who trash the gospel, and be bold enough to put our lives on the line. The gospel of Christ deserves nothing less.

EXTRA MATERIAL

You're familiar with the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa. It leans almost twenty feet out of perpendicular. It's almost secure. When the architect was planning that tower, he designed a tower that reached a height of 179 feet but had only a ten-foot foundation. No wonder it leans! It's almost there. To me, the tower of Pisa is like a person who's "not a particularly religious, but in all other respects an ideal churchman." He/she has an inadequate foundation.

Dishonored his name by throwing it around carelessly? Ignored him for days at a time as if he was totally unimportant? Worshipped him a few times a year as if he hasn't done much for you? You can't fix huge mistakes you've made before God. But God did. He fixed all your sins—huge and small—with the sacrifice of his Son. Jesus died and God forgave all your sins. His complete forgiveness is for you, for your children, for all people wherever they live.