

Church 101: Witnessing to our Government (Acts 21-26)

Let me introduce a guest speaker to you this morning. He's traveled all over, he's been in Syria, that country much on the news for its extremist violence, though he was there before the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) formed

- he's ministered to both Arabs and Jews for years in the middle East
- before he came to Christ he had a criminal record for serious crimes, and as a Christian in anti-Christian countries, he's been in trouble at times with the law, in fact there's several countries he's banned from, and he's actually been in prison for his faith temporarily a few times
- he's experienced spiritual warfare first-hand in ways we haven't, in reliable accounts of demonic possession and deliverance, people of occult background he's seen convert to Jesus in a very public revival
- I've read that his evangelism has sometimes caused riots and his life has been in danger on more than one occasions, he's needed guards
- he's had unique opportunities to proclaim Christ in secular settings, in the most elite intellectual and university environments, and in his life he's been able to speak of Jesus to leaders of foreign militaries, top government leaders, even very anti-Christian heads of State.

His latest travels thru Israel included the Temple Mount area in Jerusalem, which is a volatile area I know, as I can picture it from when we were there. That's the area inside the wailing wall today around the Dome of the Rock. Muslim-non-Muslim tensions are highest in this site holy to both. In 1951, King Abdullah of Jordan was assassinated on the very Temple Mount after discussing a peace treaty with Israel. In the middle ages there was a public execution by a Templar at the foot of the Temple Mount, and then an Arab assassin murdered the executioner there. The Crusaders shed blood on this spot, but the worst blood-bath in history in this temple complex was 70 AD.

That gives a little context of history on that site that dates back to Solomon's temple and the traditional site of Abraham offering up Isaac (not Ishmael as the Muslims say). At any rate, this missionary speaker got jammed up there with Israeli security, and non-Israeli peacekeeping forces also got involved. There were conflicting reports of the mob's violence, but there's a reliable report we have of the event-it's Acts 21. The speaker we'll hear from is Paul. After his ministries in Arabia and Syria (Gal 1:17-18) and his imprisonment in Philippi (Acts 16), the intellectual elites at Mars Hill (Acts 17), spiritual warfare with demonic occult powers in Ephesus (Acts 20), today in Acts 21 trouble at the temple will lead to an audience with military and govt leaders.

Look at Acts 21:28. It says they were 'crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."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.³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.³² He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.³³ Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done.³⁴ Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.³⁵ And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd,³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"³⁷ As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek?"³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?"³⁹ Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people."⁴⁰ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:^{22:1} "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women,⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.⁶ "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me.⁷ And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'⁸ And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'

There's no greater speaker to hear from this morning and no greater Savior than Jesus of Nazareth, and there's maybe no greater setting in the book of Acts than Paul on the steps of Jerusalem addressing the city and the Roman army, soldiers, centurions (captains of hundreds), and the military leader of the land, the tribune/commander. *MSB*: 'He was the highest ranking Roman official stationed in Jerusalem' and it suggests on 21:32 hundreds of troops. If this happened today it would be on int'l news, maybe live, or viral later.

How is a Christian to relate to pagan government officials? The NT doesn't leave us in the dark on this, it gives us a whole section of the book of Acts that shows us how in several encounters Paul had, that are inspired for and instructive to us today. The Roman government was different in some ways than ours, in many ways much worse than ours, but Paul understood God's calling wasn't to whine about bad leaders or get worked up about our pagan government or whip up a revolt like 21:38. We're to witness to them, 22:15: *'you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.'* Everyone includes Romans, persecutors, pagans, policemen, and politicians
[Acts 1:8: witness to your community and the end of the earth]

Paul models 3 ways Christians should be a witness to earthly governments:

1. Within rights, but willing to suffer for Christ

The accusations against Paul were not right in 21:28, so Paul asks for a right to speak to the commander in v. 37 and for the right to speak to his accusers in v. 39. Their false accusations in v. 28 were that Paul was anti-Jewish and anti-Judaism and anti-Jerusalem: *'...against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.'* Paul was innocent on all counts of those charges, he was a Hebrew of Hebrews who ministered to the Jews first, he upheld the Law's goodness but taught it can't save, yet he's there following OT Law in v. 26 and temple protocol, and didn't bring Gentiles in as they wrongly thought in v. 29. What they said and did wasn't right, but Paul's defense isn't about him --it's about Christ. Not Paul's rightness, Christ's in 22:14 *'the Righteous One'*

We can be thankful for rights we have, like free speech (which much of the world through most of history hasn't), but like Paul let's use our rights not to whine about our world but to witness to our world. Let's use our right while we still have it, to tell a lost world about the Lord who set aside the rights of heaven to come to our messed up world, to make right what's wrong, to live the righteous life we could never live for us, and to die for us, so as many as receive Him, He gives a right to be called sons of God, to those who believe

All who repent of their sins and trust Jesus as Lord are given in Rev 22:14 *'the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.'* In Gen 3, that right was taken away by sin, but paradise is restored in Christ, it is a right of every citizen of heaven to partake of life eternal. That's the most important right to life. You can hear more about that in the SS audio online from last week on rights, gay rights, and gospel rights,¹ the most important.

In Acts 22 when Paul's persecutors go beyond what's right in the law, when the message of Christ might be discredited as not right, I think Paul with that motive appeals to his rights to be protected as a Roman citizen in 22:25 *'when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"*²⁶ *When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen."*²⁷ *So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes."*²⁸ *The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth."*²⁹ *So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.*³⁰ *But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet [i.e. Jewish govt.]...*

It's ok to exercise rights and we should as voting citizens, but if authorities ask us to do what God forbids, there's also a time to be willing to suffer for the higher law of Christ. In Acts 5 the authorities gave the church orders to stop teaching in the name of Jesus, but they reply *'We must obey God rather than man'* (5:29-30). Those are some of the descriptions in the narrative, but applications must be rooted in NT prescriptions or imperatives (commands).

Rom. 13 commands submit to government, its rights protect for good (v. 4). 1 Peter 3:14 adds *'if you should suffer for righteousness' sake...Have no fear of them, nor be troubled,*¹⁵ *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...*

And this leads us to a 2nd way to be witnesses to even pagan governments:

2. With respect for authorities who need Christ

We already saw his respectful appeal to civil authorities in Acts 21 and 22.

In Acts 23 his mouth slips against Jewish authorities: ¹ *And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day."* ² *And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.* ³ *Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?"* ⁴ *Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?"* ⁵ *And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'* "

[Paul wasn't perfect, and Scripture records bad examples to learn from]

Paul confesses he should not have spoken evil of a ruler, that's a violation of Scripture, which he quotes from here. Even a ruler who mocks Christ to His face or whose words or ways are a slap in the face to followers of Christ, or those who literally strike the face or physically persecute, we're not to strike back physically or verbally, reviling in return or speaking evil of a ruler (the NIV has 'insult' in v. 4). I've heard people justify doing this with our leaders in America, 'but, our president (or whoever) is doing what's against God's laws!' That's exactly what this ruler did in v. 3, ordering Paul to be struck in a way that was against God's law. But Paul says it was wrong to revile back.

[same is true of what we say of today's rulers, or send by email]

It's not wrong to tell someone they are in sin or living contrary to God's law, if it's for the right motive, but not to insult/revile '*you whitewashed wall!*' In Mt 23, Jesus did rebuke religious leaders as '*white-washed tombs,*' so why's Paul convicted here? Maybe the simplest answer is that Jesus was speaking *as God and as the authority over man*, while Paul is speaking as a man to his authority. There are times in Scripture that *God as their authority* speaks directly or thru a prophet to rebuke kings, but *as men* we're to respect rulers who we disagree with, and to respectfully reach out to them by our witness. We're not God-inspired prophets, so we need to be careful and respectful. In this section, a bigger section than we can read every verse, there is a pattern.

[Paul goes from Jerusalem to Caesarea, the Roman govt. buildings]

In Acts 24, Paul appears before his government, addressing Governor Felix: ¹⁰ *And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied: "Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense ... [we're not going to look at his whole speech, but notice Paul speaks respectfully to this government leader who needed Christ. He spoke in a way that this man later wanted to hear about his faith] ...* ²⁴ *After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus [Paul's respectful speech to a pagan government leader earned a private audience]*

What would you share with a governor or government leader if you had an audience with them? Would you give them a piece of your mind on your pet issue, a political tirade, a personal soap-box speech about your hobby horse, a pressure-tactic, or just use it as a prime opportunity to air your complaints about government's problems? Paul focuses on the gospel, the solution to all problems, and more important than Paul's judgment, how Felix can escape God's judgment. His approach wasn't politics, it was personal faith in Christ

[in v. 25b Felix dismisses him till he calls Paul back at a 'convenient time' NKJV]

Felix was worse than anyone in our government, a brutal leader executing radical political activists opposing him, crucifying 'an incalculable number of both insurgents and innocent victims,' according to Josephus.² Even the Roman historian Tacitus disdained him as having 'the mind of a slave,'³ and influential Romans didn't like him. Nero would soon replace Felix (v. 27), but Paul didn't hate and despise this sinful government leader like Jews and Romans did. Paul loved him enough to share Christ with him and his wife. Paul didn't flatter him in v. 10 and he didn't fear him, in fact in v. 25 it was the pagan governor who began to fear the Lord as Paul spoke of Christ! He wasn't ready to repent in v. 25, but the end of v. 26 says Felix often sent for Paul and talked with him, and I think part of it was Paul's respectful words.

[I think of the queen who feared but respected John Knox's preaching]

In chapter 25, the Jews try to get Paul deported from Caesarea to Jerusalem, because they want to kill him on the way, but Paul reminds the governing authorities of his right as a Roman citizen to be judged at Rome's tribunal:

25:10 *Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well.*

¹¹ *If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar."*

[the supreme court] ¹² *Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go."* ¹³ *Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived ...*

[Festus had replaced Felix's jurisdiction and cases]

This King Herod Agrippa II would have been even harder to respect. Paul would have known this guy's dad, Herod Agrippa I, had arrested Peter and killed James, and was so wicked God struck him down on his throne and he was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12). We think *our* rulers are bad ... how bad was that guy's *uncle*? Think a party at the white house, a bloody human head is brought in on a platter because the president was so consumed with lust for his wife's daughter's dirty dancing so he promised anything (Mk 6). *His* dad, Herod the 'Great' murdered every baby and toddler in Bethlehem.

It's hard to imagine a more sinful dynasty and family than Herod Agrippa's, but to make him even harder to respect, v. 13 mentions *Bernice*. MacArthur says this 'was scandalous; Bernice was not only his consort [royal spouse] but also his sister ... Their incestuous relationship was the subject of gossip in Rome (where [he'd] grown up). Bernice would occasionally leave her brother and lover for another man (she had been the mistress of Emperor Vespasian and later of his son Titus) [and sister of Drusilla, wife of Felix]'⁴

Apparently the apple didn't fall far from the tree of Herod Antipas who had married his sister-in-law unlawfully while she was still married to Philip. At any rate, it must have been hard for Paul to respect this pompous pagan king of the Jews in v. 23: *On the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in...*[now Acts 26]¹ *So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself."* Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:² *"I consider myself fortunate that it is **before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews,***³ *especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently ...* [and he gives his testimony and the gospel and notice his repeated respectful royal addresses, end of v. 7]... *And for this hope I am accused by Jews, **O king!** ...* [v. 13] *At midday, **O king!**...*[v. 19] *Therefore, **O King Agrippa!**...*[v. 25] *Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, **most excellent Festus,** but I am speaking true and rational words."⁶ *For **the king** knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner."⁷ **King Agrippa** ...* [bold, respectful]*

Now this is not just Paul's example in the narrative, it's an imperative for us: Romans 13:7 says not only are we to submit to government and pay taxes, it also says we're to pay respects and honor. 1 Peter 2:17 says '*honor the king.*' The ESV has '*Honor everyone ... honor the emperor. Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect ...*' (and it even mentions those who beat their slaves in v. 20, unjust authorities in v. 19). Who was emperor when the NT commands '*honor the emperor*'? It was Nero (also the Caesar Paul appealed to). That guy who murdered his mom and most family members? The leader killing Christians for entertainment in the arena and burning Christians alive in his palace as torches to light up the night like a circus? President Obama may be hard to respect because you disagree with his healthcare mandate or same-sex marriage support, but Nero invented and did same-sex marriages!⁵

He didn't just endorse gay weddings, Nero engaged in his own gay wedding and paraded himself through the streets in gross public displays of affection. This is the Roman govt. Rom 13 says submit to, because God ordains even pagan rulers! We may reject their lifestyle but must respect their leadership position and laws except where they command us to disobey God's Word.

Listen: if Peter and Paul said and did honor Nero, we can honor our leaders! 1 Peter 2:12 *Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God ...* ¹³ *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme,* ¹⁴ *or to governors as sent by him ...* ¹⁵ *For this is the will of God ...* ¹⁷ *Honor everyone ... honor the emperor.*

[that includes what we say and what we send by email, too]

We may not respect the person or their sin but must their position (Rom 13), and we respect and recognize their authority and that they need Christ (#2), which leads to response #3: **Readiness to declare salvation in Christ**

We already read 1 Pet 3:15, be ready to give an answer of the hope in Christ within you, it adds do it *'with respect,'* gentleness, honoring Jesus as Lord. If you're still struggling with point #2, maybe turning to Eph 6 will help. It says in 1 Tim 6:18 we're to be *'ready to share'* in general, and in particular we're to daily be ready to share the good news even as we daily lace up our shoes as Eph 6:15 says. Eph 6 explains political authorities, pagan rulers, powers in government, politicians of flesh and blood aren't the real enemy

¹² *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the **cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*** ¹³ *Therefore take up the whole armor of God ...* [look at v. 15] *and, as shoes for your feet, having put on **the readiness given by the gospel of peace.***

That's standing in the gospel, a readiness to declare salvation in Christ. It's how Paul was thinking, like v. 17 says *'the helmet of salvation.'* That's what guarded Paul's mind, thinking in salvation terms. The flesh and blood rulers in the Roman authority weren't Paul's real enemy, they're his mission field! There are spiritual rulers and authorities behind governmental ones, and our weaponry is not politics or policy-change, it's heart change by God's Word.

¹⁷ *and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying ...* [v. 19 says] *also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,* ²⁰ *for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly ...*

So Paul in Acts 26 isn't just standing before a king, ambassadors/governors, Paul is speaking boldly as an ambassador of the gospel of the *King of kings*. Paul writes Ephesians awaiting his audience with the government in Rome, but his prayer is not political, it's the proclamation of the gospel in boldness. He was ready, as he also wrote: "***as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome...For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek*** (Rom 1:15-16 NKJV, Acts 26 had both)

[Paul loved to tell the story of Jesus and His love, do you? Are you ready to?]

Jesus told His disciples '*be dressed in readiness, keep your lamp lit*' (NAS, Lk 12:35) and '*you are the light of the world.*' Are we ready to let our light shine before men, before secular authorities in the world or workplace? Paul wrote '*be ready in season and out of season ... do the work of an evangelist*' (2 Tim 4:2, 5). It's not just for preachers of the Word, Titus 3:1 reminds all: *to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be **ready** for every good work, **to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people*** [why? the gospel in v. 3-7]

So as we go back to Acts 26 we see Paul practiced what he preached for the sake of the gospel. He was courteous in light of the kindness of God in the gospel that he mentions in the next verse of Titus 3. He wasn't quarrelsome or complaining, speaking evil; he was gentle, submissive, and respectful to government leaders that weren't that respectable in their wickedness. Why? To obey God's Word, God's authority, and to open up doors for the gospel.

In Acts 25, v. 23 the doors open up for the royal family, try to imagine the pomp and ceremony it describes as you've seen in movies of Roman times. 25:23 says this was in '*the auditorium*' and there were '*prominent men of the city*' there with the tribunes, or translations say *commanders* or *high-ranking officers and the leading men of the city*. Today's British Empire isn't the 1st century Roman Empire but maybe the closest parallel we can envision is the House of Commons chamber in Westminster with parliament and the Prime Minister present, and lords and local ministers of the crown are there, and commanders of the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Marines make a special appearance, and the royal couple themselves enter on a red carpet.

In 26:1 the king gives Paul the floor for a speech to his government. v. 6: '*now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers,*⁷ *to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king!*

⁸ *Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?*' Paul always went right to the resurrection, the resurrected Christ in 22:8, and the resurrection in 23:6 was the issue he pressed before the Jewish council, and in 24:15, 21, the resurrection is what he pressed before unsaved government

And here before the Jew's king, Gentile governor, commanders and the top-ranking men, he gets right to the resurrection, challenging all to believe it. If he was here today his hope would still be the resurrection, not Republicans. It's ok for a Christian to be involved in government, but our hope must be in the gospel and the kingdom where the govt will be on Jesus' shoulder (Isa 9)

Paul knew his mission. He says it in v. 16, in the resurrected Lord's words:

¹⁶ *But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you **for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness** ... [that's the purpose, and ours, 1:8, be witnesses. Jesus explains the goal of this gospel witness, v. 18]*
¹⁸ ***to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.*** ¹⁹ *Therefore, **O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision*** ²⁰ *but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, **and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance ...***

I get the sense Paul's not acting as his own attorney here on defense, he's on offense with the gospel. Not being offensive, he's respectful but also crystal clear that he's here as a witness to Gentiles (pagans like in the court he's in), and just as his eyes were blinded on the Damascus road and then opened, he is called to open their eyes that they may turn from sin and Satan to God the Savior and have sins forgiven if they will truly repent and that will result in a changed life, changed deeds. The resurrected Lord calls for repentant lives

²² *To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, [i.e., not just the rulers in that place, all in the place] saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles ...*
²⁷ *King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.* ²⁸
And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" ²⁹ *And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am...*

Paul's saying 'that's why I'm here, not politics, to persuade you to Christ, not only you, but everybody in this auditorium needs to become a Christian!' It says in v. 30 the King and Bernice and governor and council got up and left. Kings and nations tremble at the voice of God at times. Gov. Felix trembled back in chapter 24 as Paul spoke of righteousness and coming judgment and Felix said he might call him back at a convenient time that never came. Acts 17 says some told Paul they'd hear him again, but never did. And here King Agrippa in v. 28 says this *time* won't be his time to become a Christian, yet? Translators aren't sure if v. 28 is a question. NASB: *'In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.'* And Paul said, *'I could wish to God...'* NKJV: *'You almost persuade me to become a Christian.'* [i.e., 'almost had me there...'] 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 ..."*

Paul's saying 'almost' isn't enough, you need to be altogether all-the-way in! It may be the King realized if he listened much longer to the gospel and his conscience he might be persuaded, so he gets up to leave. Felix feared God's righteous judgment but put it off saying I'll call for you maybe another time. But close only counts in horse-shoes and hand grenades, not for heaven. It's like a guy Jesus told *'you are not far from the kingdom'* (Mk 12:34), but He also warned many would come right to the door but not enter (Lk 13:24-27)

There's an application here today for any who are close or 'almost Christians discovered' as one Puritan said it. To Felixes or Agrippas, Philip Bliss wrote

"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," come, come today! "Almost persuaded," turn not away;

Jesus invites you here; Angels are ling'ring near;

Prayers rise from hearts so dear; O wand'rer, come!

"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!⁶

The Holy Spirit says, 'today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts' (Heb 3:7, 15, 4:7). Listen to how just Luke's gospel uses the word 'today':

-*today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior* (2:11 NAS)

-*'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'* (Jesus said, 4:21)

-Zaccheus, you come down, for I'm going to your house *today* (19:5, song),

and at his house Jesus says *'Today salvation has come to this house'* (19:9)

-and on the cross Jesus said *'Today you will be with me in paradise'* (23:43)

'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and *today* and forever' (Heb 13:8). Now is the accepted time or favorable time, now is the time of God's favor, today is the day of salvation, as 2 Cor 6:2 says. Isaiah 55 says call on Him while He is near. Like Paul says in v. 29, may all who hear this voice become like him. And may we who are already Christians be encouraged, emboldened to be witnesses in our community and to the end of the earth, including earthly governments and authorities in society and the workplace. Within our rights let's freely speak of the gospel while we can to whoever we can. Let's not be known for being whiners about our world but being witnesses to our world. Let's be respectful but bold and ready to tell our testimony and the old story.

¹ <http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=921141724340>

² Simon Kistemaker, *Acts*, p. 835, citing Josephus, *War* 2.13.2, *Antiquities* 20.8.5.

³ As cited by F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p. 355.

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Acts*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 326.

⁵ <http://www.reformation.org/perverted-marriage-of-nero.html>

⁶ Philip Bliss, "Almost Persuaded."