Life's Triumph, Life's Tragedy

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines Ministries
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Let's Begin

The book of Acts could well be called "The Witness Book." Witnessing is a most prominent feature within the book (cp. Acts 1:8). Here we possess a record of God's people witnessing to others about their experience with Jesus.

A.T. Pierson wrote, "Witnessing is the whole work of the whole church for the whole of the age." It is the business of every Christian to be a witness. Unfortunately, Christians are challenged today by a culture simply wanting to be left alone, "Why don't you mind your own business?" we hear so often.

The late Francis Schaeffer, when lamenting the weakening of a Christian-dominated cultural consensus, wrote, "the majority of people adopted two impoverished values: personal peace *and* affluence. *Personal peace means just to be let alone, not to be troubled by the troubles of other people, whether across the world or across the city "to live one's life with minimal possibilities of being personally disturbed." We learn from Scripture—especially Acts 26—the church possesses no option to become stone-cold silent toward our neighbor's spiritual condition.*

As we study Acts 26, let's follow the simple outline below:

I. The Triumph of a Changed Life (vv. 1-23)

II. The Tragedy of an Almost (vv. 24-32)

I. The Triumph of a Changed Life (vv. 1-23)

A Christian witness is one who can tell what he has seen, heard, and knows concerning Jesus Christ. If you have had an experience with Jesus, you can tell about it. Consequently, you are commanded to give your witness (cp. Matt. 28:19-20).

Paul was perhaps the most effective witness who ever lived. In this section of Acts he again tells what happened to him on the Damascus road when he fell to earth, coming face to face with his Lord and Savior. He speaks of this experience as "the heavenly vision" (v. 19). Thus, The heavenly vision began, continuing as a bold adventure and concluding as a happy victory.

Paul's testimony concerning his heavenly vision gives us three necessary ingredients of an effective Christian witness.

Reflection Connection

Reflect upon your own conversion experience. Would you be able to characterize your experience as a "heavenly vision"? Why or why not?

The first ingredient was the change in his personal life (vv. 4-15). Change often gets a bad rap. Few of us enjoy too much change or too rapid change. However, no change is like the change which comes when people meet Jesus. Indeed it's not too much to say, if one is not changed, one has not met Christ. Paul would later say it like this, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). So what does this change mean?

It means a person's focus changes from *religion to reality* (vv. 4-5). Paul never gets tired of speaking about his old Pharisee days—"I lived a Pharisee" (v. 5). These four words summarized his religion. Being a Pharisee meant being the most strict conscientious Jew of Paul's day. And, he was utterly sincere. However, mere sincerity won't save. More significant questions deal with the true and the real. From living as a Pharisee, Paul "saw a light" (v. 13). The light he saw, he would learn, would define his change to reality.

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No doubt exists that he came face to face with Jesus, the promised Messiah. What was spiritual darkness concerning God's prophetic Word regarding Israel's deliverer, transformed as the light of Christ shined upon him (2 Cor. 4:6). Luke is clear, "And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God, unto our fathers: "Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews. Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?" (vv. 6-8).

Through centuries faithful and devout Jews hoped for Messiah. God had promised; they waited expectantly (cf. Luke 2:25; John 4:25). It's one thing to *hope* to be saved; it's quite another to *know* you are, to *experience* it.

The second ingredient was the call to his purpose in life (vv. 4-15). Paul became Christianity's greatest preacher. He reminded the Galatian believers, "But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed." (Gal. 1:23). How does one account for the radical change in Paul's life? Liberals say it was epilepsy or merely a sunstroke. If so, what a blessing to humanity if we all had such attacks of leprosy or sunstroke!

Christ longs to change our life. He longs to have others say of you and me, "Things are different now..."

We could explore other theories people have concocted explaining the change in Saul of Tarsus. However, the only suitable explanation is, Jesus instantly and miraculously changed his life!

Christ longs to change our life. He longs to have others say of you and me, "Things are different now...Something has happened to me since I gave my heart to Jesus." But He desires not to *change* us only; instead He wants to *call* us to serve Him.

Here are the words describing Paul's newfound purpose: "...I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness...Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me" (vv. 16-18).

God purposed for Paul's life that he be "not disobedient" to the heavenly vision given him. The great Christian writer, A.J. Gordon, once answered a question posed concerning the secret of his effective life, by saying, "I never said, no , to God."

The commission Paul received was a two-fold commission. First, he was a *servant* of Christ. The term "servant" means "minister." It was used of personal attendants to Kings. Anyone who aids another in any work is an assistant. Think of it: Paul was to be a personal assistant to Jesus Christ.

Reflection Connection

How would you characterize your conversion to Christ? Would you say it was "vivid" or "radical" or "subtle"? Explain.

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Assisting Jesus is the greatest honor ever bestowed upon a person. To assist the omnipotent God of the universe in His plan to redeem lost sinners! The famous missionary Hudson Taylor received his call from God. He heard God saying, "I am going to evangelize Inland China, and if you will walk with me, I will do it through you."

Paul was also a *spokesman* for Christ, faithfully and repeatedly speaking for Jesus (cp. v. 22). No less are we to speak for Christ. Some Christians begin well, but falter along the way, mindful of the weak blossoms which only lasted "for a while" in Jesus' parable (Matt. 13:21). Someone quipped about "Alka Seltzer" Christians who shortly "fizzle out."

Nothing makes up for an absence of Jesus.

The third ingredient was the Christ of his life (vv. 22-23). Jesus was his main theme. Nothing makes up for an absence of Jesus. We must witness concerning His *crucifixion*, the suffering Jesus experienced for us. O how He suffered! The nails, thorns, and the spear remind us of His suffering (cp. Isa. 50:6; Heb. 13:12).

We must speak of the *shame* of His crucifixion. In addition, the *sufficiency* of His death being the full price for our sin debt dare not be overlooked. Neither may His resurrection. He was the first to rise again to die no more. When He arose He conquered death, hell and the grave.

II. The Tragedy of an Almost (vv. 24-32)

Three men in Acts 26 illustrate the variety of attitudes toward Jesus Christ. Festus was *alienated* from Christ (v. 24). He thought Paul was going mad before his eyes. He mistook earnestness for insanity (Mark 3:21). This is how the person away from Christ looks at Christianity. It isn't madness to be in earnest about money or power or pleasure, but it is considered foolish to be earnest about Jesus and salvation and eternal life.

Paul's philosophy is, *altogether* for Christ, sold out to His Lordship. His philosophy of life is, "For to me to live is Christ" (cp. Phil 1:21). And, finally, there's Agrippa, who's almost to Christ. In this man is the story of a tragedy-*the tragedy of the almost*. He was so near, yet so very far. He was *almost*, but not *altogether*.

Reflection Connection

Think of a time when you almost won a game, almost finished a project, almost had an automobile accident. Compare the "almost moment" with Agrippa's coming to Christ. Prepare to discuss with the entire group.

The Bible tells us of several tragedies of the almost. Israel was almost over into the promised land when they decided to rebel against the Lord (Deut. 1:19, 25-26). Recall also the concubine in Gibeah who almost escaped death (Judg. 19:27). Nevertheless, by far the greatest tragedy is for a lost soul to be almost saved; almost in the kingdom, but to be lost. Jesus told a perceptive scribe, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). Like Agrippa, he was almost, but not altogether.

Let's notice the reality of the almost (v. 28). Verse 28 is notoriously difficult to translate. Various interpretations as to what Agrippa meant have been proposed. The best interpretation acknowledges Agrippa's sincerity. In other words,

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Agrippa was close to being a Christian (v. 26). Chief among the influences was the *persuasion* of the Scripture— "these things." Paul had been using the Scriptures as was his custom (v. 22). God's Word is powerful like a sword (Heb. 4:12).

Scripture pounds like a hammer and burns like a fire (Jer. 23:29; cp. Jer. 20:9). The purpose of the Scriptures is to make you wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15). The Bible will bring a man close to salvation. According to David, "the entrance of thy Word giveth light" (Ps. 119:30). God ordained that Agrippa should receive a Christian witness (cp. Matt. 10:18 and Acts 9:15). And standing before him was one of the greatest Christian persuaders the world has ever known. (2 Cor. 5:11).

Now, let's observe the reasons for the almost. Why was Agrippa almost a Christian and not altogether one? As we look around the room we see why Agrippa stopped at the gate of almost instead of going into the land of altogether. His first hindrance was Bernice, representing his love of sin. Agrippa was living with his own sister! If he became a Christian, he would have to give her up.

Becoming a Christian involves repentance, a turning from sin.

Many come to the verge of decision for Christ, but some sin in their life keeps them away. Becoming a Christian involves repentance, a turning from sin. This is the real problem behind many who profess intellectual difficulties. Most of the arguments against the Gospel are bred in the quarters of a corrupt life.

Recall Festus had already called Paul a mad man. Agrippa may have thought, what will he think of me if I become a Christian? All of us want to be accepted and liked by others. No one wants to be laughed at, or made fun of. Some are not saved because they are afraid of what others may say. Many are laughed out of heaven and into hell!

Reflection Connection

Do you think many today are on the verge of becoming Christians but are halting right outside the door? Why or why not? What influences could we employ to nudge them closer to accepting the Gospel?

There is a cost attached to being a Christian. Jesus promised trials, tribulations, and persecutions. It may mean you will have to go to prison for your faith. Others have. It would be better to wear chains upon the hand than to endure chains upon the soul.

The basic reason Agrippa did not become a Christian was the unbelief of his own heart. He was religious, prominent, and wealthy, yet he said no to Jesus Christ. If most people are candid, this is the real reason they are not Christians. Jesus said, "ye will not come to me that ye might have life" (John 5:40). The issue Paul pressed home to the heart of Agrippa— "believest thou?" Salvation involves an act of the will. But this is not the end of the matter.

Let's finally note the results of the almost. So Agrippa didn't become a Christian. What were the results of being almost persuaded? Four consequences are clear. Agrippa missed the blessing of being a Christian. Almost is not enough. In fact, almost is to miss!

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Some baseball teams almost win the pennant. Some runners run for the trophy and almost win. A marksman shoots at the target and almost hits it. All of these images characterize a man like Agrippa. He never knew the joy of being a Christian. He never experienced the forgiveness of sin, the presence of the Lord in his heart, or the peace of God flooding his soul.

Another result Agrippa experienced is this: he brought greater judgment upon himself. To hear about salvation and to turn away is worse than to never hear. God's judgment is in proportion to the light one has. One is better off being an ignorant pagan, never hearing the Gospel than a cultured American who rejects it.

Agrippa turned away from an exceptional opportunity when he rejected Paul's earnest plea. Those who have had many opportunities to be saved are headed for an awful judgment.

In addition, Agrippa hindered others. What if Agrippa had been saved? Maybe Bernice and Festus would have followed! The course of a whole nation could have been changed. A man seldom goes to hell by himself. Friends are leading friends to hell; parents are leading children to hell.

Finally, Agrippa endures an eternity of regret. Oh, the tragedy of almost! In hell, almost is not enough.

Golden Greek Nugget

In verse 11, Paul describes his attitude toward Christians as "being exceedingly mad" toward them. Interestingly, the phrase is only one word in the Greek. It literally means rage against and can be translated "being furiously enraged at." Paul's purpose in life focused exclusively on persecuting the church. After his conversion, his purpose became preaching Christ.

Wrap Up

Which will it be: almost or altogether? Were we able to ask Agrippa what he would do if he were in our place today, things would be different for him. Perhaps he would rush to bow before Jesus and voluntarily surrender to Him as Lord of all. The tragedy of the almost, however, is the impossibility of going back. My hope is you will see almost as not enough and you will altogether give your life to Christ.

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