

Paul a Prisoner: Before Fetus and Agrippa

Acts 25, 26:19-32

by J.R. Miller

Paul's sermon emphasizes the importance of obedience, repentance, and trusting in God's plan for our lives, highlighting the dangers of almost being saved and the power of Christian realization.

Scripture: Acts 26:19

Topics: "Obedience to God", "The Importance of Repentance"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the importance of obedience to God's heavenly visions, as exemplified by Paul, who remained faithful despite persecution. He highlights that true repentance involves not just turning away from sin but also actively turning towards God and living out one's faith through actions. Miller warns against the danger of being 'almost saved,' as seen in Agrippa's response to Paul, and encourages believers to recognize their identity as children of God, which empowers them to share the gospel. He concludes by affirming that God's plans, even when they seem difficult, are ultimately for our good and serve a greater purpose in spreading the gospel.

Transcript

When Paul told his judges of the command of Jesus that he should work for him whose followers he had persecuted, he said, "I was not disobedient." The trouble with too many people, is that they are disobedient. They hear the voice of God--and do not obey it. They have glimpses of the lovely things of Christian life and do not strive to reach them. If only we would always be obedient in little things--as well as in great things, our feet would constantly be lifted higher and higher, each step taking us into a nobler, truer life, nearer to God.

It was the heavenly vision which Paul obeyed. There are visions that are earthly and there are visions that are heavenly. This world starts dreams in our hearts. But he who follows only earthly visions, wins nothing that he can keep forever. There are also heavenly visions--glimpses of God's beauty, revealings of God's will, intimations of lovely things which we may attain. It was a heavenly vision that Paul had--a vision of Christ himself in his divine glory. Heavenly visions come to all young people, inviting them to pure, good, true, holy things. The Christian mother's teachings, as she holds her little one on her knee and talks to it of Christ, place before the young eyes a vision of the Savior in his beauty and love. When we meditate upon a verse of Scripture and it opens, giving us a glimpse of something lovely in character or starting in our

minds a thought of duty, it is a heavenly vision that we are having. Every fragment of loveliness we see in a human life is a vision sent to win us toward better things. We should never be disobedient to any heavenly vision--but should follow it as an angel sent to woo us nearer to God.

Obeying the heavenly vision, Paul declared to the people, "that they should repent and turn to God." Repentance is a good word. It means to turn--to turn away from the things we have found to be foolish and sinful. The other phrase is also important, "turn to God." It is not enough to drop the sins out of our life. If this is all we do, if we simply stand with our back on our evil ways, taking no step in the other direction, we have gained nothing. The mere giving up of bad habits will not save anyone.

These people were told, moreover, that they should "do works fit for repentance." The Ephesians did works worthy of repentance, when they brought out their books of black arts and burned them. Zacchaeus did works worthy of repentance, when he made restitution to those he had wronged and began a new life with Christ. We need not talk about having repented, unless our life proves our repentance.

Paul had now been a Christian about twenty-five years, and these had been years of struggle, amid enemies and dangers. But the heroic old apostle had never faltered, never turned back. He had stood faithful and true through all. It was a grand record--but he takes no praise to himself. He says the help came from God, for all this standing and witnessing. Some young people are afraid to set out on a Christian life, because they fear they will not be able to stand. Here is the word for all such--they may obtain help from God for every duty, for every hour of danger, for every struggle. God never puts a burden on us, without providing us with the strength we need to carry it.

"You are out of your mind, Paul!" That is what the world is constantly saying about those who are very earnest in religious life. They said Jesus was crazy--his own family thought he was. Festus said that Paul was insane. But who really was the madman that day--Paul who believed on Christ and was living for the invisible things; or Festus, who sat there and sneered? Who is mad now--the devout and fervent Christian who loves Christ and serves him--or the scoffer and reviler? There is no madness like that which disbelieves the realities of eternity, and rejects the mighty love of Christ. Men really only come to themselves, when they awake to their true condition as lost sinners and return to God their Father.

Agrippa after listening to Paul's speech and to the further personal appeal to yield his heart to Christ, said, "You almost persuade me to be a Christian!" Paul had turned from Festus to King Agrippa, asking him if he believed the prophets. Perhaps the reply of Agrippa was only a sneer. Possibly his heart was touched and he wished to hide it. No matter; one thing we know--this was Agrippa's one great opportunity for salvation, and he threw it away! Such opportunity comes to all. Every lost one was at some time on the edge of being saved. Men reach the door--but do not enter. They are near the kingdom of God--and then turn away unsaved.

There is a story of a woman lost in the Alps. All night she wandered, seeking the way to refuge. In the morning they found her a few steps from the hotel which she was vainly striving to reach. Just so, close about heaven's gates, countless souls perish--almost saved, yet lost. Almost will not avail.

The intensity of Paul's desire for the conversion of his judges was shown by his next words:

"I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." Paul knew that he had something which Agrippa and the others had not. Sometimes Christian people forget that they are children of God, that they have eternal life, that heaven is theirs. But even in

the presence of the king, the governor, and the other people of rank that day--Paul was conscious that he was far richer than they were, had a higher rank. He had something which they had not, and to possess which would greatly add to their happiness. If Christians all had this realization of their dignity, honor, and noble calling--it would greatly add to their power in urging others to come with them into the same blessed life.

After a conference, those who had heard Paul, agreed that "this man might have been set free, if he had not appealed unto Caesar." So it looked as if Paul had made a serious mistake in appealing Caesar. If he had not done so--he would have been set free that day. His appeal that day, however, made it necessary that he should be sent to Rome. To some it would have seemed better that he should have been released from prison--that he might go out to preach. But there was another Hand that was at work, unseen those days, amid the complicated movement of things. God's plan was being wrought out in spite of, even in and through, men's enmities and persecutions.

Paul had a mission to Rome. He was needed to carry the gospel there. If he had been released at this time he would probably have been seized again by the Jews and might have fallen a victim to their rage and hatred. This appeal made it necessary that the government should take him to Rome. Thus protection was assured to him and he was carried to the world's capital, without personal expense, that he might there preach the gospel. Thus Rome itself became a helper in extending Christ's kingdom through the empire. God's plans for our lives are always good, and we need only to submit to them.

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