

VOICES FROM HEAVEN AND HELL

by

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"I Was Almost Persuaded To Be A Christian"

by **King Herod Agrippa II**

"To my mind there is no more terrible word than the word almost. It is a word that sears with greater intensity than a literal flame. Would that the pain of hell were only a burning body, as well as a burning conscience! Would that I could escape from that burning flame almost! It torments me day and night. It is an everlasting flame of torment.

"It is the word almost that made me a dweller in hell. It is a cursed word. Almost made the difference between Heaven and hell. Almost made the difference between everlasting happiness and eternal misery. Almost made the difference between the love of GOD and the wrath of GOD. It is a tormenting word. Almost I was in the arms of CHRIST but I continued in the clutches of the devil. Almost my sins were pardoned but I continued in the guilt of sin. Almost I ascended into Heaven but I descended into hell. Better had my tongue been burned before uttering that word almost. Now it remains with me to torture and torment. It is a hellish flame.

"It came about in this way. On earth I was known as King Herod Agrippa II. I was the great-grandson of Herod the Great who ruled when JESUS was born in Bethlehem. My father, Agrippa I, favoured the cause of Judaism over against Christianity. He slew James the apostle with a sword. I was sent to Rome for my education. I lived in the palace of Emperor Claudius who personally saw to my education.

"Although I was taught to worship the Roman deities my heart leaned to the religion of the Jews. As a matter of fact I was circumcised and studied the law and the prophets. While in Rome I secured several favours for the Jews. I persuaded Claudius to relinquish the official high-priestly robes which the Romans had taken from the Jews. I often represented the cause of the Jews at court.

"My father died when I was seventeen. Claudius thought I was too young to rule over Judea .. But when my uncle, Herod of Chalcis, died I was given his domain. The people there called me king. However, at the age of twenty-five Claudius gave me the tetrarchies of Philip and Lysanias

so that I became a king in reality. Sometime later Emperor Nero added a number of cities to my domain.

"Perhaps you know something about my sisters, Drusilla and Bernice, who were somewhat notorious in my day. Drusilla left her husband in order to live with Felix. Concerning my sister Bernice I would prefer to say nothing. We lived together in such a way that it caused a scandal to both Jews and Romans. We were severely criticized. So much were we criticized that Bernice married King Polemo of Sicily. But she soon left him and came back to me. Before you condemn me too much you must realize that she was unusually attractive. Afterwards she became the mistress of Emperor Vespasian and also Emperor Titus his son.

"You might think by this scandal in my life that I was irreligious. That is not so. I was intensely interested in all religious questions. Early I became convinced that the Jewish religion was far superior to the paganism of Rome. I believed in the existence of the GOD of the Jews. I embraced their religion and was circumcised. The writings of the Prophets interested me a great deal. Of course, I became acquainted with the promise of the Messiah. This Messiah, according to the Prophets, would establish a great Kingdom. This Kingdom would rule over all the nations of the earth.

"In the history of the Jewish nation many claimed to be this promised Messiah. The most recent one was a man by the name of JESUS who was born when my great-grandfather, Herod the Great, was ruling. Nothing came of his claims, however, as he was crucified under Pilate. His followers claimed that he had risen from the tomb on the third day after his crucifixion. It was claimed that he appeared to many of his disciples. According to the Jewish religion and the teachings of the Prophets a resurrection was possible. This phase of it interested me very much.

"Whereas it was thought that this movement would die out, it seemed to increase. The followers of JESUS, who were called Christians, were terribly persecuted. My father took the side of the Jews against the Christians and to please them he slew James the apostle. I myself had not contacted this movement but was very much interested in it. My opportunity to know more about it came during a visit Bernice and I made to Caesarea to pay our respects to Festus who had succeeded Felix as procurator over Judea.

"Festus was in a quandary about what to do with a famous prisoner by the name of Paul. He told me that his accusers brought no accusation of evil-doing except in regard to the question of religion. He said that the main question seemed to be about one JESUS whom the Jews said was dead but whom Paul maintained was alive. I had heard about this Paul who at one time persecuted the Christians himself but who had become the leader of the Christians. I said to Festus that I would like to hear this man. So Festus said we would hear him on the morrow.

"Bernice was also interested in hearing this Paul and made me promise that I would take her along. Many called her the most wicked woman of our generation. But, as in my case, she was not irreligious. When she married King Polemo she made him embrace the Jewish religion. She was interested in anything that affected Judaism.

"When the time came the prisoner Paul stood before us in his chains. I said: '**Thou art permitted to speak for thyself.**' Then Paul gave his defense. I must confess that his words gripped me. He

spoke with sincerity. Somehow I felt that he was speaking the truth. His experience was real.

He started by telling how he belonged at first to the strictest sect of the Jews, the Pharisees. He said it was concerning the hope of Israel that he was judged. That hope, of course, was the coming of the Messiah. And he asked me whether I thought it incredible that GOD should raise the dead. Of course, it was not incredible as GOD had performed many miracles throughout the history of the Jewish nation. GOD could raise the dead. This I acknowledged within my heart.

"Then he told us how he had persecuted the Christians at Jerusalem - how he imprisoned some and caused others to be put to death. But let me give you the remaining part of Paul's defense in his own words so that you might have some idea of how it impressed me. Paul continued: **'And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities. Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O King, I saw in the way a light from Heaven; above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And I said, Who art thou, Lord? He answered: I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; 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. Whereupon, a king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: but shewed first unto them at Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance. For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me. Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ, should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.'**

"At this time there was a sudden interruption. Festus, my fellow judge, could not contain himself. He cried out: **'Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.'** I can understand why Festus would think that Paul was out of his mind. To his pagan mind the talk about the resurrection of JESUS, of repentance, and of forgiveness of sin would sound like the ravings of a mad man. I had, however, a better understanding of these things through my study of the Prophets. I knew the power of GOD. I knew what the teaching of repentance meant. I understood that atonement had to be made for sins. But this was all a foreign language to Festus who considered that much learning had made Paul mad.

"Paul replied by stating to Festus: **'I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.'** And then Paul turned to me and said: **'King Agrippa,**

believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.'

"Yes, I believed the Prophets. I believed in their teachings of the coming of the Messiah. I believed in their doctrine of the resurrection. I knew it was necessary to repent in order to please GOD as the Prophets stated so frequently. I knew that one had to obtain the forgiveness of sin before one could stand in the presence of the holy GOD of Israel. And now Paul was challenging me to believe that JESUS was the Messiah. This meant repentance and turning to JESUS for forgiveness.

"There was something compelling about the words of the prisoner Paul. His earnestness and sincerity impressed me. I felt that he was telling the truth about the Messiah. But for me to believe in this JESUS and to become his follower was something quite difficult. It would mean the opposition of the Jews whose friendship I prized. It would mean that they would turn against me even as they turned against Paul. Why, I might even be put in chains like Paul and lose my position as King. I would lose my friends for they would think I had lost my mind. No, I will not be persuaded to believe in this JESUS. It is too risky. It demands too much.

"I had not lost what Paul said about repentance. He stated that one had to repent his sins. While I loved the religion of the Jews I lived the life of the Romans. According to Paul one had to turn away from sin before one could become a follower of JESUS and receive the forgiveness of sin. That would mean that I would have to give up Bernice. It would mean that I would have to give up pagan feasts and pagan vices. I loved my sins. The price was too high. I will not be persuaded by this Paul. I will not give up my sins. I am too fond of the life of this world to follow JESUS. I will not be persuaded. Yes, I would like to have my sins forgiven but there is too much to give up. So I said to Paul: '**Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.**' And Paul replied: '**I would to God, that not only thou but also all that hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am except these bonds.**'

"Yes, would to GOD that I had been fully persuaded to be a Christian! Would to GOD that my tongue had burned before I had said almost! Of what avail is my position as King now? Even those who fawned on me upon earth mock and ridicule me in hell. Of what avail are my sins now? The remembrance of them sears my conscience and adds to my torment. Upon earth the things of the earth seem to be so important and of such great value. But what doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul as I have done?

"Almost Heaven was mine. Almost forgiveness was mine. Almost CHRIST was mine. Almost, almost, almost. That is the flame of hell which torments me day and night. Would to GOD I had been fully persuaded to be a Christian!"

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