

When Two Worlds Collide Acts 24:22-27

As a father, more than a few of our speeches we make to our children are quite forgettable. We may remember every word, and we may place those moments into the family archives of important moments, but with most of them, the jury may still be out on their overall effectiveness. As fathers, we may go about it the right way—bathing those times in prayer, gaining the counsel of our wives and other wise brothers, wrestling with choosing our words carefully, and expressing with our tone some measure of self-control. But when we’ve come to the end of one of those “legendary” moments, we desire some specific responses, don’t we? “Yes sir,” is always helpful. Meaningful eye contact and verbal interaction are small victories in and of themselves. Eye rolls, huffing and puffing, and talking back aren’t good signs. We desired that our words might land near the runway of their hearts, but all indications point to us having sputtered into the ocean of futility. “Lord, I’m trying. Drive it home as only You can, I pray,” may be how things end.

It seems from last week’s text that Paul’s airtight defense should have made a legal dent in his favor. He used respectful words, honest words. Paul was not given to flattery like his Jewish opponents. I think it’s accurate to say that he took to task the high priest and the prosecuting lawyer. But the crescendo of Paul’s lock-tight arguments ended with the open confession that he was joyfully guilty of trusting in the Risen Christ. And instead of hearing a gavel of progress towards his release, our text tells us that he was met with a dampening procrastination by Felix the governor.

But not all was lost—perhaps like those talks with your children. Paul moves from defending himself to another kind of defense. He finds himself contending for his own life to then contending for the faith that gives life to others. In other words, Paul’s isn’t getting completely lost in the barrage of potential discouragements, but as he defended himself in the previous text, we have to acknowledge that Paul obeyed the words of Christ given to him a week prior in Acts 23, “*Take courage.*” The Lord spoke to Paul, and Paul is enabled to speak courageously, honestly, and respectfully to others. He was practicing what he had preached, “*Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*”¹

In fact, our text today is somewhat of a primer on relationship dynamics towards those outside of the Christian faith. What can we learn about being a faithful witness to Christ? And, how do we process God’s providence under clouds of discouragements?

I. Delayed Judgment (from Felix)

²² *But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case.”*

Paul courageously declares the resurrection to be the source of his beef between his accusers and himself. It’s not a matter of the state; it’s a theological matter. Luke conveys that these issues regarding the Christian faith aren’t foreign to Felix. He possessed *a more exact knowledge about the Way*. He knows about those who claim to follow Christ, and this would make sense on two fronts. First, on a personal level—he’s married to a Jewish woman named Drusilla, according

¹ Colossians 4:5-6

to verse 24. Second, on a political level—he's the governor of Judea. If he failed to see the thousands (even if it's a few thousand) of people that have converted to the Way, or, if he failed to understand on some level what would compel them to do so, he would derelict in his gubernatorial duties. Part of his task was to know the people, the political factions, concerns of infrastructure, food distribution, border control, and no less various religious expressions.

And what one might expect after reading through verse 21 for the first time is some type of favorable legal rendering for Paul. He wipes the floor clean with his arguments, which laid bare the unverifiable claims that the high priest and Tertullus the lawyer made against Paul. And what does Felix do? He decides to postpone the trial until he can confer with Claudius Lysias! It's like Felix lazily held up Paul's polished defense, yawned with astounding indifference, and tossed it aside like a monotone speech on watching grass grow! There must be some fishy things bobbing below the surface here. Why put this case on the shelf for later when Paul's opponents had no legs to stand on? Why an adjournment without an acquittal?

One does wonder whether self-preservation made the top of the list on reasons why. If multiple religious leaders in Jerusalem, who had significant influence...if they stayed stirred up and irked by this apostle Paul on the loose, then the potential for political upheavals would certainly increase. What political figure wants that on his watch? Yet, Felix doesn't side with the Jews for Paul's condemned either. He's most likely convinced of Paul's innocence, believing this to be a dispute of beliefs within Judaism, not a dispute with Roman ideals. Felix is riding the fence of expediency. He doesn't acquit, nor does he condemn. He defers to Lysias.

II. Open Doors (for the saints and Paul)

²³ Then [Felix] gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and yet have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him.

Some seasons may feel like it, but not every providence is a bitter pill from the LORD. The order for this centurion was not let Paul loose, but to loosen his chains a bit. It was a welcome reprieve, and nothing short of God's kindness to Paul while in custody. When pain wounds us, His mercies are sure to be applied to those wounds in some way. To the outside observer Paul is merely stuck in the Roman justice system, kept there by accusers and disinterested, power-hungry politicians. Yet, eyes that have seen beyond the temporal to the eternal know better. Felix gave orders, but Proverbs 21:1 is taking place under Felix's nose, "*The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*" It was not God's timing for Paul's freedom, but it was His purpose to see to Paul's soul.

We see that here in that he was granted some liberties, mainly in the form of receiving visitors. Being in Caesarea, Philip and his daughters would have been regulars for Paul. Other believers from the fellowship and maybe a few saints from Jerusalem would come, *ministering to him*. The door for ministry opened wide for believers to seek Paul's good while in custody. We don't have to imagine what kinds of ways they served Paul. They prayed for him, spoke the Word to him, sang with him, made sure he was well-clothed. I imagine Paul enjoyed some good Mediterranean dishes, seafood in particular, with Caesarea being a port city.

The church loved Paul in his captivity, in his less than desirable situation. That's the ongoing call we've been given as well with one another. When the chips are down, we rally with an abundance of loving

service. I've lost count with how many times I've witnessed you, with little consideration of yourself, your time, your resources, have loved others when hardship strikes them in some way. And to maintain a level of sacrificial concern for one another, like some of these believers did to Paul, relationships within the church we can't let up on the gas of prioritizing one another. How do we do that? We communicate faithfully with each other. We gather faithfully to worship and pray. We take time for that prayer request email. We throw darts together. We sew bonnets together. Go to the movies together. Eat together. Share the gospel together. Swim together. Change the oil together. Each week, we commit to our formal discipleship times, and a couple of informal discipleship times.

God granted the brothers and sisters an open door to serve Paul. But look at the other open door He provided in verse 24. ***24 But some days later Felix arrived with Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus.***

25 But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, "Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you."

Maybe a bit unexpectedly, we find out that Felix is married to a Jewish woman. Early church historian Josephus gives us some backstory on this marriage, and helps us to better understand Felix the man. Drusilla, "whose beauty surpassed all other women," was already married when she was approached by a Jewish magician named Atomos, who was sent by a love-struck Felix. Whatever Atomos did or said, Drusilla drank the potion of persuasion, left her husband, and "fell into Felix's arms."² It was certainly not a marriage made in heaven, but one built upon the sand of deceit. People with power will often seek to seize what's not theirs.

But this man of low character summons a man with the highest of purposes: knowing Christ and making Him known. And the doors for the gospel fling wide open beginning in verse 24. Felix ***sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus.***

And notice how Paul couches faith in the Messiah. Nothing's truncated about what he lays out to this couple. ***Righteousness***—what Christ has secured for His people by His perfect life and death at the cross. When we stand before the great throne of judgment at the end, this will be our only glorious denial and affirmation, "Lord, this is not my robe. It's Your Son's!" Righteousness. Then, Paul speaks to this couple about what that righteousness means for the present, summed up by the phrase ***self-control***, which is codeword for holiness of life. Christ saves to sanctify. Paul conveys this in his letter to Titus, "***For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people (Christ's righteousness) training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.***" We can be sure that these were not a character qualities of Felix nor Drusilla. And, if they're not squirming in their proverbial seats by this point, hearing Paul talk about ***the judgment to come*** invokes a response beyond squirming.³ ***Felix, verse 25, became frightened and said, "Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you."*** Another procrastinating moment for Felix.

Paul's 3 darts—justification, sanctification, and glorification—hit something sensitive in Felix. And he simply couldn't bear the weight of these truths. ***Go away***, he says.

² Josephus, *The Essential Works*, a translation by Paul Maier, 279.

³ κρίματος is in the same word family as the word for condemnation in Romans 8:1. It's likely that Paul could have been pressing the justice of God in condemning all of His enemies, which would have resonated with Felix, being a leader in the Roman empire, and, which could have caused his fear and the demand that Paul leave his presence.

Can you? Have you squared up to and come to grips with ***righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come***? The fullest life, the most meaningful kind of life in this world, the joy that each of us was created for is found in what Paul is layering for this couple each time he has the opportunity to speak with them. He's answering life's heaviest and most demanding questions that we could ever raise. *What's wrong with me?* I'm unrighteous! *And what's the answer to my greatest problem?* Another righteousness not my own! Jesus offers Himself in a death we deserved and offers His perfect record before God the Father so that we would know His rescuing grace. *How should I be living my life?* *What will make me happiest and what pursuit will honor God most?* The pursuit of a holy life! *What will happen at death?* A world-wide judgment where Christ will separate His sheep who walk by faith from the goats who stumble around by sight! Come to Christ; rest in His work and never your own. Have ***faith in Christ Jesus***.

Brothers and sisters, pressing Christ on others will sometimes have the Felix-effect. They'll hang in for a while, then they've heard enough. Conviction of sin. Guilt. Shame. Anger at life. Anger at God. The light of truth searches and exposes and often frustrates those being searched and exposed in the process. The presence of the living Christ is not pleasant to much of the world. If the gospel is the might of God that breaks the power and curse of sin, then the gospel is unpalatable to sin's dark cravings.

III. Exposed Motives (in Felix)

²⁶ ***At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore, he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him.***

The deception of Felix didn't stop with hiring the magician to pull the wool over Drusilla's eyes. Under the pretense of being interested in what Paul had to say, Felix keeps sending for Paul. And he does so with the hopes that one day Paul would end the whole legal mess in normal, under-the-table fashion, common among political figures of the day—the exchange of money for freedom. Felix, as was the custom of governors during this time, was himself accustomed to taking bribes. One scholar wrote him, “He was one of the most depraved men of his time. [Roman historian] Tacitus says of him that ‘with all cruelty and lust he exercised the power of a king with the spirit of a slave.’”⁴

But how did Felix know that Paul had the amount of money expected in such an exchange? Well, back in 24:17 Paul stated in his testimony that after being away several years, he had come to bring gifts of charity, *alms to my nation*. Also, since digital wallets and bitcoin were a few years from being invented, hauling that much physical money, gathered from various churches throughout Asia and Europe, would get caught in the wind, news that was sure to circulate among various authorities. Some scholars have even suggested that Paul, apart from the collection, was a man of means.⁵ A man in Felix's shoes would have no need to ask, “What's in your wallet?” He would know or have ways of knowing that information due to his high position.

What's more impressive than figuring out the details of how Paul might pay for his release is that with a clear opportunity to do so, he holds tight to his integrity. It could all go away with a quite exchange. No more annoying conditions. No more taxing other brothers and sisters with visits. No more trials where his character is smeared with false charges. He can go on and keep strengthening the churches

⁴ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 408.

⁵ Sir William Ramsay, *St. Paul: The Traveler and Roman Citizen*, 310-313, as quoted by John Stott; Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, 320.

and seeing to their good. It can be quick. It can be discreet. And all of this goes away. Paul may have been tempted by the bribe-bait, but he didn't bite.

A common temptation we have amid troubling times is to get so lost in our own sense of struggle that we give ourselves a pass on doing the right thing. "Surely, the LORD will understand," we say. He knows our frame; He remembers that we are but dust, weak, tempted by a thousand falls. Yet, we'll never find His seal of approval on even the smallest packages of compromise. Surely one of the schemes of the Devil is to break us with compromise when we are bent over with difficulties.⁶

We keep saying it because it's a truth worth repeating—Paul is not Jesus. He repeatedly needs Jesus in his weaknesses. But one reason Paul doesn't budge in the face of this bribe is that about 2 years before this appearing before Felix, Paul wrote this when he was in Macedonia, "*Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. [25] Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; [26] on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; [27] in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. [28] And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.*" Don't you know that the weight of these sufferings drove Paul to depend upon the promises of Christ in ways that ease would never push him to do so? Like muscles that atrophy (shrink and weaken) when unused, there's something to this in a spiritual sense as well.

In the letters of John Newton, he writes a letter to William Wilberforce's niece, describing the benefits of affliction. There he pens this,

Many of our graces cannot thrive or show themselves to advantage without trials, such as resignation, patience, meekness, long-suffering. I observe some of the London porters (baggage carriers) do not appear to be very strong men; yet they will trudge along under a burden which some stouter people could not carry so well; the reason is, they are accustomed to carry burdens, and by continual exercise their shoulders acquire a strength suited to their work. It is so in the Christian life...activity and strength of grace are not ordinarily acquired by those who sit still and live at ease, but by those who frequently meet with something which requires a full exertion of what power the Lord has given them."⁷

Paul has his weaknesses, but he's not new in the faith. He's been around the global block and back again, a few times. God has chiseled his servant to stand immovable at this crooked offer of an easy road to freedom. You see, the house arrest continued for the apostle, but true bondage belonged to his captors. The high priest, the lawyer, and the governor—they had clout, but that clout was invisibly adorned with spiritual chains. Paul possessed something different, or Someone different—the Spirit of the Living God. And where the Spirit of God is, there is true freedom and favor with One who holds "all authority in heaven and on earth."⁸

⁶ Ephesians 6:11, "*Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.*"

⁷ Banner of Truth, *The Letters of John Newton*, 82-83.

⁸ Matthew 28:20

In chains, Paul is ready with the gospel. The church is unified in their loving service for him; the kind of witness that God used in the spread of early Christianity.⁹ And Felix, feeling the heat of the truth, turns to one of his own gods—he's ready for a payday. When Paul doesn't deliver, we note next, verse 27...

27 ...after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.

IV. Closed Doors

Two years?! It seemed as if the Jewish heads had prevailed on some level. Paul was not in their synagogues, spreading the news that could liberate them from their own chains. Next to being dead, this was a best-case scenario for them.

The scene does take us back a few hundred years into the home of one of Pharaoh's chief officers named Potiphar. Joseph, in Genesis 39, is doing more than minding his business. He's minding the business of Potiphar and is placed over his whole estate with the blessing of God. Potiphar's wife seeks more from Joseph than Joseph is willing to give. She cries foul. Potiphar believes her lie. Innocent Joseph is placed in prison. In time, Pharaoh's cupbearer is imprisoned for his own offense. This cupbearer has a dream. Joseph interprets it, stating that the dream signified the cupbearer's release in 3 days' time. Joseph then tells this cupbearer, "*Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house.*" Joseph was right...Pharaoh restored the chief cupbearer to his position, but here is Genesis 40:23, "*Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.*" Then, this is the line that grabbed me from chapter 41:1, "After two whole years, Pharaoh..." I'll let you read the rest, but you hear how these stories rhyme?

At the end of verse 27 we're given further reason for sizing Felix up as an impoverished man who loved himself best, ***and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.*** There is just a certain kind of wisdom in not placing our highest hopes in high places. Why? Because our gospel challenges the very fabric of human authority, and grinds to pieces mountainous masses of pride, manipulation, and self-trust that often plague those in positions of power.

Instead of leaving on the right note, Felix makes a last move before moving on to Rome. The collective gripes of the Jews and maybe a few heated words in his own living room by his Jewish wife Drusilla moved him to this last unjust favor. "After all," writes David Gooding, "the imprisonment of an innocent man was a small price to pay for keeping himself, such the defender of justice, out of trouble."¹⁰

Those doors of justice and witness were temporarily closed for Paul by the empty-handed, incompetent governor. But what we know about Paul's true Ruler is that He is the earth's more-than-competent King.

⁹ In AD 60 there were approximately 6000 followers of Jesus Christ on planet earth. By AD 350 there were nearly 32 million Christians in the Roman Empire alone representing about 53% of the total population (Rodney Stark, *The Triumph Of Christianity*, 157). The was due in some part to the sacrificial service and hospitality of Christians. The Roman world suffered through two remarkable plagues in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Paul Carter, in his article *How Did Christianity Take Over the World?* wrote that in each plague about 1/3 of the population was completely wiped out. Pagan physicians and priests abandoned the major cities during both significant outbreaks while Christian stayed behind.

¹⁰ David Gooding, *True to the Faith*, 465.

Conclusion

Paul has taken courage in a Christ whose promise stands, from 1 Samuel 12, “*For the LORD will not forsake his people, for his great name’s sake,*” to Psalm 118, “*The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*” to Isaiah 42, “*And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them...These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them,*” to John 14, “*I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*” All those promises being a precursor to Revelation 21, “*Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.*”

Paul will continue to wear chains “for the hope of Israel” and for the Gentiles.¹¹ Like a father who speaks with prayerful hope to those that he loves, Paul will soon attempt to grip a king with the message of a Risen Christ and His death for sinners.

Brothers and sisters, it is inevitable that your world lived in the grace of the gospel will collide with those who love according to the world and its misplaced longings. Take courage in your Risen Savior and go, bearing His name. Yes, you’re busy. Yes, you have some things going on in your family, in your heart, in your work. But so do the people sitting in front of you, and behind you, and beside you. “*...You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). In every space we find ourselves in, God is able to make Himself known through our words and life. But, like Paul, He won’t strip you of all that could potentially encumber you towards that end. The wounded, the weak, and the worn are among His best gospel bearers.

¹¹ Acts 28:20.