

Felix: Later, Lord!

Acts 24

Introduction

I recently received a hilarious series of events that expectant parents should attempt in order to prepare for parenthood. This list encourages the readers that preparation for parenthood is not just a matter of reading books and decorating the nursery.

Some simple tests for expectant parents to take to prepare themselves for the real life experience of being a mother or father include:

For women: to prepare for maternity, replace your wardrobe with oversized nightgowns; pick your favorite one and stick a beanbag chair down the front and leave it there for nine months. After nine months, remove 10% of the beans.

For men: to prepare for fatherhood, go to the local drug store, tip the contents of your wallet on the counter, and tell the pharmacist to just help himself. Next, go to your local grocery store and arrange to have your paycheck direct deposited to them. Then go home, pick up the newspaper and read it for the last time.

Can you handle the mess your toddler will make? To find out, smear peanut butter onto the sofa; hide a fish stick behind the stereo and leave it there all summer. Then, get out the crayons and color the wall nearest you.

Before your child is born, find a couple who are already parents of a preschooler and berate them about their methods of discipline, lack of patience, and how they have allowed their children to run wild. Suggest ways in which they might improve their child's self control, table manners, sleeping habits, toilet training, and overall behavior. Enjoy

yourselves – it is the last time in your life you will have all the answers. (How true! This is good preaching!)

Learn the names and story lines from all the past *Barney and Friends* show. When your favorite color is purple and you find yourself singing in the car all by yourself, “I love you, you love me . . .,” you are just about ready for parenthood.

One final thing – if you think buying that mini-van prepares you for classy, clean, and convenient family transportation, well, think again. Get ready for an entirely different kind of traveling experience. Do not expect to leave it out in the driveway spotless and shining. In order to prepare for what a family car truly is, go buy a chocolate ice cream bar and put it in the glove compartment. Leave it there. Take a bag of Oreos and crumble them up in the back seats and mash them down into the fabric. Oh, and get a quarter, or maybe a couple of pennies and stick them into the cassette player. Finally, run a garden rake along both sides of the van. There! Perfect.

For those of you planning to have children, we want to be an encouragement to you!

Frankly, there are some things in life you will never fully be prepared for!

Oh, you might think you have all your ducks lined up in a straight row, but then it happens – life changes. There are surprises, pressures, reversals – and the ordinary events of life turn out differently than we expected or planned. Our foresight can never equal our hindsight.

Regarding the apostle Paul, I do not believe he ever imagined the way things would turn out in

Jerusalem. Yes, the Spirit of God had warned him of impending danger, but I am sure he never imagined that the church would refuse to defend him, his own people would riot, and now, as we will see, that he would face two years of imprisonment in Jerusalem.

Whether he expected it or not, that is exactly what is about to happen. I invite you to join me in Acts, chapter 24, as we slip into the courtroom of Felix, the Governor of Judea, and listen as Paul's trial begins.

The Prosecution Accuses

You may remember that Paul recently escaped an assassination conspiracy. It was funded by, of all people, the high priest and members of the supreme court or Council of Israel, the Sanhedrin. But Lysias, the Roman commander, learned of the plot and surrounded Paul with several hundred soldiers to march to the governor's palace in Caesarea.

The adulation of Felix

Look at verses 1 through 4 of Acts, chapter 24, where the prosecution begins to make their accusations of Paul.

After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with an attorney named Tertullus, and they brought charges to the governor against Paul. After Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying to the governor, "Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation, we acknowledge this in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness. But, that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing."

Talk about buttering someone up – Tertullus, the hired orator, was really piling it on! The word translated "attorney" or "lawyer" in verse 1, is the Greek word "rhetor," which gives us our word "rhetoric".

Tertullus was a golden-tongued orator. The Jewish leaders knew if anyone could put Paul behind bars without one shred of evidence, it was this "wordsmith" Tertullus.

He basically begins by flattering the governor with lies. In verse 2a, he says,

. . . Since we have through you attained much peace . . .

There was, in fact, more turmoil and less peace in Judea under Felix than under any previous governor.

Then Tertullus says in verse 2b,

. . . since by your providence ["pronoia" or "wisdom; foresight"] reforms are being carried out for this nation

This is another lie. Under Felix, the people were so frustrated by his corrupt government that uprisings were daily news.

In verse 3, Tertullus then awards Felix with the title,

. . . most excellent [most noble] Felix . . .

The truth was far different. Antonias Felix was actually the first slave in the history of the Roman Empire to become a political leader – and not because he deserved it. The real story was that Felix's brother was a close friend, from childhood, with the man who would become known as Emperor Nero. Felix's brother persuaded Nero to allow Felix to become governor.

Once Felix had secured his place, history records that he became as cruel as Nero with a penchant for crucifying his political enemies. The Roman historian Tacitus described him as, "a master of cruelty and lust who exercised the powers of a king with the spirit of a common slave."

I say all of that to help you feel a little of what Paul felt. He was standing in the courtroom of a crooked judge, while listening to the flattery by the religious leaders of his day. And, by the way, what an illustration of the world perverting the truth this is.

Felix is called most excellent or noble, yet he is wicked. Paul will be called all manner of things, yet he was the one who was truly noble.

The world calls darkness – light; evil – acceptable; sin – good, and at the same time, calls righteous men and women – out of touch, old fashioned, not with it.

Paul told Timothy, in II Timothy, chapter 3, verse 12,

. . . all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Jesus Christ said, as recorded in Luke, chapter 6, verse 22,

Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man.

If you live a godly life in the midst of an ungodly culture, you will make waves, upset some apple carts,

and pay some kind of price. In fact, if you are not on the receiving end of criticism and flak and have not experienced being avoided and left out as Christ predicted, it may very well be that you are not living a godly life.

The accusation of Paul

So now, having given Felix a heavy dose of empty praise and adulation, Tertullus begins to accuse Paul. Look at verses 5 through 9.

“For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. [We wanted to judge him according to our own Law. But Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands, ordering his accusers to come before you.] By examining him yourself concerning all these matters you will be able to ascertain the things of which we accuse him.” The Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so.

Let me point out the three accusations that they made of Paul.

Accusation #1 – Paul is a troublemaker

1. The first accusation is that Paul is a troublemaker.

The word used in verse 5a is “pest,” which could be translated “plague”. The use of this word was a calculated move which was supposed to get Felix stirred up.

In other words, “Felix, Paul is guilty of sedition; he’s a threat to the peace of Rome. Paul is stirring up dissension throughout the whole world.”

Accusation #2 – Paul is a ringleader

2. The second accusation is that Paul is not only a troublemaker, he is a ringleader.

Tertullus says in verse 5b,

... a ringleader of the sect of Nazarenes ...

This was a derisive slur, by the way, as Nazareth was considered backward and illiterate; a town of lazy no-goods.

Now, follow this prosecutor’s masterful line of reasoning. By linking the Nazarene sect with sedition, Tertullus implies that Christians as a whole should be viewed as dangerous people.

If this accusation is proven true, not only Paul, but Christianity at large is in deep trouble with Roman law.

Accusation #3 – Paul is a blasphemer

3. The third accusation is that Paul is a blasphemer.

In verse 6, Tertullus says

... he even tried to desecrate the temple

Tertullus is simply reminding Felix that the Sanhedrin should be allowed to try to convict Paul since the policy of Rome had in the past, allowed the Jews to execute those who violated their sacred temple.

In other words, “Felix, you don’t need to be troubled with this case. Let us deal with him in Jerusalem, just as we’ve dealt with others before who have desecrated the temple.”

The Defendant Answers

Now, Paul, the defendant, is given an opportunity to answer. Look at verse 10 of Acts, chapter 24.

When the governor had nodded for him to speak, Paul responded: “Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense,

Notice there is no flattery, by the way. Paul simply makes the statement that, since Felix had experience handling Jewish law as well as Roman law, Paul felt confident that he would receive a fair trial.

Continue to verses 11 through 21.

since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship.

Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city itself did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot.

Nor can they prove to you the charges of which they now accuse me.

But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that

is in accordance with the Law, and that is written in the Prophets;

having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.

Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings;

in which they found me occupied in the temple, having been purified, without any crowd or uproar. But there were certain Jews from Asia—

who ought to have been present before you, and to make accusation, if they should have anything against me.

Or else let these men themselves tell what misdeed they found when I stood before the Council,

other than for this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, “For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.”

In other words, “Those who accuse me are not here to testify. I am not guilty of causing an organized plot against Rome. In fact, I was in Jerusalem only twelve days, which is hardly enough time to mastermind some conspiracy!”

However, Paul does say, in verse 14, “I am guilty of this – I am a member of the Way.”

He goes on to clarify that the Way (Christianity) simply fulfills the Old Testament law and the prophets – scriptures that declare the coming resurrection of the living, the dead, the righteous, and the wicked alike.

The Case Adjourned

Now continue to verses 22 and 23.

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.”

The words translated “put them off,” or “anaballomai,” can be translated, “he adjourned the proceedings.”

Then he 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.

Felix avoided making a decision. He was not waiting for Lysias’ report – he already had it in his hands. Luke recorded it for us in the previous chapter – and Lysias told Felix in the report that Paul was innocent.

Felix was putting the matter off simply because he did not want to offend the powerful Jewish lobby standing in his courtroom. He also did not want to hand Paul over to them because he knew they would kill Paul and that Paul did not deserve to die.

Subsequent Hearings Allowed

Now, this is where the story takes an unusual turn – and a very interesting one.

Felix and his wife, Drusilla

Look at verse 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.

Just the name Drusilla would have perked up the ears of any Israelite. This is a woman who was front page news in every tabloid in the Middle East. She is a Jewess, Luke reminds us. So, in other words, she is a woman who sold her national birthright for a mess of royal pottage; a woman who had long ago walked away from the God of her fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Drusilla was a raving beauty, historians pass down. By the age of fourteen, she was the wife of a Syrian prince. However, she was mystical and superstitious – and Felix used that to steal her away. He had a magician named Atomos, persuade her that the stars and spirits said it must be. So, she left her husband and at the age of sixteen, married a more powerful, wealthier man – Felix.

She wanted to hear from this strange man named Paul, so perhaps she persuaded her husband to hold a private hearing. “Bring in Paul – I want to hear what this strange Jew is saying!”

So, Paul came in to their royal chambers, and there they sat – successful, beautiful, rich, powerful, corrupt, immoral, and, from a human standpoint, holding the strings to Paul’s life. What will he say to them? Verse 25 tells us.

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.”

Wow! Stop for a moment!

Paul’s three point sermon

Let us look at this three point sermon of Paul’s.

Point #1 - righteousness

1. The first point is righteousness.

“Righteousness,” in the Greek is “dikaiosune,” or “a holy standard”. Paul let them know right away that no matter who they thought they were, they were not the standard, judge, or jury of that which was truly right – God was.

Righteousness is the attribute of Paul’s God. And Paul introduced God, as it were, to Felix and Drusilla.

Point #2 – self-control

2. Paul then moved on to point number two, which is self-control.

Paul knew their story. In fact, everyone knew how this couple lived – fast and loose. Their escapades were front page news.

Instead of skirting the issue, Paul preaches to them on the subject of self-control. The Greek word is “egkrateia,” which is a word specifically related to the control, or the lack thereof, of sexual desires. Whether they wanted to hear about it or not, Paul preaches to them on the subject of their own sexual immorality.

I am amazed at Paul’s courage. This is like getting up on stage at Caesar’s palace in Las Vegas and preaching on fiscal responsibility. It is like going to New Orleans during Mardi Gras and preaching from Proverbs that drunkenness and immorality can destroy your life. This is like going to Disney World during gay week and preaching from Romans, chapter 1, on how God has given homosexuals over to depraved minds, to do those things which are not natural.

Paul could have preached on a hundred different topics and a thousand different passages, and yet he chose to move his way right into their living room, their parlor, and their bedroom. And he looked them in the eye and said, in effect, “You are sexually immoral and guilty before a righteous God.”

Hugh Latimer, the English Reformer, often preached before Henry the VIII. On one occasion, he offended the king with his boldness. So, word came to Latimer, who by the way, would be condemned to die, that he was to preach the following weekend and in his sermon, make a formal apology. On the next Sunday, after reading his text, he addressed himself as he began to preach: “Hugh Latimer, do you know before whom thou art this day to speak? To the high and mighty monarch, the king, who can take away thy life if thou offendest? But then, consider well, Hugh Latimer, do you not know from whence you came; upon whose message thou art sent? Even by the great and mighty God! Who is all present, and Who sees all thy ways, and is able to cast thy soul into hell!”

He then preached before King Henry VIII the exact same sermon he had preached the week before – with even more passion.

Point #3 – the judgment

3. Paul wraps up his passionate discussion with his third point, which is the judgment to come!

This is obviously a reference to the “great white throne” judgment that is described in Revelation, chapter 20. Paul had concluded his sermon to the Athenians in the same way.

He looked at this powerful couple, who could simply give orders and things happened, heads rolled, and told them, “There is a higher courtroom; there is a greater judge, and there is an awful day coming when you, Felix, and you, Drusilla, will stand before Him as corrupt, sinful, guilty ones. You will be without hope.”

That message is for every one of us today. Your sins are either on you, to be paid for by you, or they are on Christ, who paid the penalty for them nearly two thousand years ago.

There is a judgment day coming! And, the only way to avoid standing before God covered with the filth of your sin is to have already given it to Christ who died, the righteous One, for us the unrighteous, in order that He might bring us to God (I Peter 3:18).

Felix alone

Notice again, the response of Paul’s audience in the last part of verse 25.

. . . *Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you.”*

The translation “Felix became frightened” does not quite give the vivid picture that Luke’s Greek word expressed. It is the word “*emphobos*,” which gives us our word “*phobia*”. It literally means, “Felix became terrified”. You could render it, “Felix began to tremble with fear.”

Felix knew now, for the first time in his life, he was a guilty sinner before a righteous God and judgment day was coming. He began to shake with fear.

His delayed decision

Then Felix said, in verse 25b,

. . . *“Go away, for the present, and when I find time I will summon you.”*

“When I find time,” is a Greek idiom that could be translated, “When I have some spare time.” In other words, “When it’s convenient, Paul, I’ll bring you back.”

“Don’t call me, I’ll call you!”

“I want to hear more about this Jesus, but I’m real busy now . . .”

“LATER . . . LORD!”

His materialistic motive

Felix eventually stopped trembling, by the way. He eventually pushed all fear aside and put on the front burner that which mattered most to him – money! Look at verses 26 and 27.

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

Did you catch that reference to time? After two years of conversing with Paul from time to time, Felix never received Christ as Savior.

“Later . . . Lord! Maybe later!”

Application – Two Final Lessons About Felix

Let us apply this text with two thoughts; two final lessons about Felix.

It is a tragic thing to have never trembled over sin

1. First, it is a tragic thing to have never trembled over sin.

At least Felix did that! Have you? Have you seen even your righteousness as filthy rags? Have you felt the weight of your sin upon your life and the guilt of it all before God?

It is even more tragic to have trembled without ever trusting Christ for forgiveness

2. Secondly, while it is a tragic thing to have never trembled over your sin, it is even more tragic to have trembled without ever trusting Christ for forgiveness.

During a summer break from college, I worked at a construction site with another young man. I shared the gospel of Christ with him as we worked, and throughout that summer, he would always end up saying, “Yea, I need to do that – I know I’m a guilty sinner – I know I need to be saved! I tell you what, I’m going to pray to receive Christ tonight when I get home . . .”

Then, the next day, he would have excuses. I can still hear him saying, “I’m going to get saved soon . . . one of these days, I’ll give my heart to Christ.”

The English proverb rings true, “One of these days is none of these days.”

If you are here with the load of sin before your eyes and you are trembling with the realization that you are guilty and judgment day is coming, then as Paul wrote, in II Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 2b,

. . . *now is “The Acceptable Time,” behold, now is “The Day of Salvation”*

The best time in all the world to be saved, my friend, is today. Do not ever say again, “Later, Lord.”

Say, instead, “Yes, Lord!”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/13/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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