

Sermon for Sunday, March 2, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D. Pastor
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"IS GOD EVER CONVENIENT?"

Acts 24:22-27

Text: "And as he argued about justice and self-control and future judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, 'Go away for the present, when I have an opportunity I will summon you.'" Acts 24:25

Some time after his third missionary journey, Paul went back to Jerusalem. Except for several brief visits many years before, it had been a long time since Paul had been there. Once, long ago it seemed, he had left Jerusalem for what he had thought would be only a few short days. He had been on his way to Damascus then and in his pocket he carried letters from the high priests that were actually arrest warrants. He had authority to bring back in bonds any persons he might find who followed the new "Jesus religion" called "The Way." But the trip had a different ending than he had thought. On that road to Damascus, he had an experience that changed the entire course of his life. On that road he met Jesus and ended up giving him his heart.

So, the years had passed. Paul became the leading emissary for that Jesus religion called "The Way." Because of it, he had braved the heat of summer, the cold of winter; he had survived beatings, stonings and whippings; he had been imprisoned and shipwrecked; he had suffered hunger and thirst. But now he had come back to Jerusalem and with him he had brought the gifts from far flung churches to the famine ridden Christians of that city. It must have been a joy to be back in ancient Jerusalem, the city of his forefathers, so he went to the temple to pray and give thanks to God.

However, that joy was to be short-lived for when the Jews heard that the greatest proponent of that hated Jesus religion was in town, they set out to destroy him. And they would have, too, had not Lysias, the captain of the Roman soldiers, intervened just in the nick of time. And Lysias--when he found out the Jews had a plot to assassinate Paul, sent him with a detachment of Roman soldiers to the prison in Caesarea. There Paul would be tried before Felix the governor.

The Jews were terribly frustrated. With Paul in the hands of the Romans, he would be tried before a civil court of Rome. Their religious charges would be thrown out of court since the Romans were not interested in Jewish religious squabbles. So they got their best lawyer, a man named Tertullus, and sent him to Caesarea with some charges that would make the Roman court sit up and take notice. They said Paul was guilty of treason and rebellion and revolution. But then Paul got a chance to defend himself. He denied all the charges but one. On that one charge he replied, "But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers." (Acts 24:14) Well, wouldn't you know it! Conflicting testimony! Poor Felix was caught in a trap. He knew Paul was not guilty of the charges brought against him and if he punished Paul--who was a Roman citizen--he would be in trouble with Rome. On the other hand, if he let him go, he would incur the wrath of the Jews. There was already enough rebellion and anti-Roman sentiment and if he angered them, they could cause enough trouble to get him fired. So Felix did what any self-respecting, honest, sincere, up-right politician would do. He post-poned the case!

But I would like for us to focus in on Felix for a few minutes. Please open your Bibles to our scripture reading for this morning and I would like to "walk" you through those passages. I think we have something very important to learn from Felix.

The first thing I want to call to your attention is verse 22 where we learn that Felix had, as the Bible puts it, "a rather accurate knowledge of the Way." Whatever else we may say this morning, never forget that Felix knew about Jesus. Let me ask you this question: do you know about the Way? Do you know that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you know that because God loves you he sent Jesus to take your place and die for you on the cross? Do you know that if you will accept him as your Saviour, your sins are forgiven? And do you know that when by faith you invite Jesus into your life and ask him to take control of your will that you have eternal life, that you will go to heaven when you die? Well, I suspect there are very few of us this morning who don't know that. Like Felix, we have a rather accurate knowledge of the Way. We can really identify with Felix at this point, can't we?

The second thing I want you to notice in verse 25 is that Felix treated Paul rather nicely--and that in spite of the fact that he considered him a rather crazy fanatic. Over in chapter 26, verse 24, when Paul is making his defense before another Roman ruler, that man--named Festus--responds to Paul's story about his conversion on the road to Damascus this way, "Festus cried with a loud voice, 'Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad.'" I'm sure Felix felt the same way.

Do you sort of feel that way about turned on Christians? When you meet somebody who is really into this Jesus business, don't you treat them rather nice, but down deep you think they are a little crazy? I've been guilty of that. Why do you think that is? Is it because we see a depth of commitment, a radical relationship, a dramatic change of life-style that threatens us? And are we often guilty of thinking anybody like that who gives up so much of self has to be a little crazy? And do you think--down deep--we wish we had such a radical, loyal devotion to something or someone that was worth giving life to? In times past I have found such devoted Christians a little threatening because in my soul I have wished something or someone could win my heart like that.

The third thing I want you to notice is in verse 24. There we learn that there was something so attractive, something so fascinating, something so appealing about the Way and about Paul's devotion that Felix wanted to keep hearing about it. So the Bible says that he sent for Paul and heard him speak about Jesus. Do you find there is something appealing about Jesus? Is there something that draws you to church this morning--is that why you are here? I suspect many of us are here this morning because we don't have that all-consuming devotion to anything but to ourselves--and life isn't working very well for us. So we are here this morning because we want to hear more--we keep hoping that somehow we will find something to meet our needs. I suspect Felix felt many of the same needs you feel this morning; that he had the same longings, the same emptiness, the same failures, and some how he wondered if Jesus was the answer.

The fourth thing I would call to our attention is in verse 25. There we read how Paul spoke to Felix about justice, self-control and future judgment. The Bible says that Felix was alarmed. Do you know why? It was because God's word condemned the life-style of Felix. See how it works! Paul spoke of justice. But Felix had ruled with a despotic hand to make his job secure. He had even murdered a priest who stood in his way. He had brought the people of Judea into cruel subjection and had beaten or imprisoned many of them. He had never let human life stand in the way of what he wanted. Are you just? Do you treat others with kindness and fairness and consideration? Or does God's word expose your relationships to others? It does mine. I discover I'm guilty of talking about other people, of being disrespectful about the integrity of another person's work, about putting people down and disregarding them. God's word exposes me.

And then Paul spoke of self-control. Self-control is defined as, "one who masters his desires and passions, especially his sensual appetites." No wonder Felix got alarmed! Historians tell us he had lured Druscilla, his wife, away from her first husband by trickery and deceit and that they lived together in adultery. We are told he gave vent to his passions and lusts and lived a vile life of drunken riotousness. He simply had no moral standards. How is your self-control this morning? Do you drink too much? Eat too much? Spend too much on clothes--on cars--on your clubs? Are you guilty of lustful thoughts--or worse? Do you have temperance and moderation in every part of your life? Well, I've got some areas in my life I'm not very proud of and I suspect you do to.

So, then Paul spoke of future judgment. Paul told Felix how God would judge him for his sins and how he would be condemned. No wonder Felix was alarmed! Do you know that is what will happen to us? Without forgiveness we are condemned. We are going to be those goats on God's left hand on the judgment day and do you remember what he says to them? He says, "depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41)

Well, that's what Paul did. He spoke to Felix about justice and self control and future judgment. Do those things alarm you? They do me. Felix saw himself as God saw him and that is always frightening. Does it frighten you that God looks on your life and condemns your sins? It frightens me. And it ought to frighten us both! What could be worse than a soul condemned to eternal damnation.

But the next thing I want you to notice is also in verse 25. The Bible says that even though Felix was alarmed, even though he knew God judged his life, he wasn't willing to change. The Bible says he told Paul, "Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity I will summon you." I like the way the King James version puts it. It says, "when I have a convenient season.. Will giving your heart to Jesus, making him the master of your life, ever be convenient? What kind of opportunity are we waiting for? How will tomorrow or next week or next year--be any different from right now. Will we want to change then more than we do now? Will it ever be more convenient?

I didn't want to change my life-style. I didn't want to become a fanatic. I didn't want to become a goody-two-shoes. Besides, it wasn't convenient. Not right then. But I knew my life wasn't pleasing to God--it wasn't even pleasing to me. I knew I didn't have eternal life. I knew that though. Jesus had died for me and I could have forgiveness I had not made him the Lord of my life. But because there was an emptiness in me; because I wanted to be different from what I was; because I wanted the joy of Jesus in my life like those Christian fanatics; because of all of that I committed my life to Him. No, it wasn't convenient, but I'm glad I did.

Do you know what a calloused heart is? Let me tell you: a calloused heart is when God calls you, when he moves on your heart, and you resist him. You tell him you are not ready yet. You put him off. And then your heart gets hardened. It gets toughened against God and we lose our spiritual sensitivity. And that's a calloused heart. That's what happened to Felix. In verse 26 we are told that after that he often sent for Paul and talked with him. In verse 27 we learn that went on for two years. But there is no record of the conversion of Felix. There is no indication he ever received Jesus as his saviour. There is no record that he ever found a time when God

was convenient. No, he put God off that day when God's Spirit moved on him and he got a calloused heart.

How many times have you put God off? Isn't it true that many of us have felt the tug of God's love, the moving of his Spirit in our hearts? I know it isn't convenient right now and we don't really want to change our lives, but could a callouse be building up? Will God ever be more convenient than he is right now?

Let me tell you a little story I read recently. A small boy was visiting with some friends out in a rural area late one evening and he was several miles from home. Before he could start back, a dark, foreboding storm arose and the sky blackened. He couldn't go home in the storm, but night came on and it was more fearful than ever as the storm raged on. Lightning flashes shot across the sky and the thunder rolled and crashed. The trees bent and swayed under the onslaught of the wind and the rain poured down in sheets. Standing at the window, looking out into the fearful night, the little boy was filled with fear. Desperately he wanted to go home, but he was afraid. But suddenly he turned from the window with a bright smile and said to his host family, "I'll get my coat now, I'm not afraid to go home any more." You see, through the darkness he had seen someone with a lantern coming and he knew his big brother had come to take him home.

There may be terrible winds blowing in your life. The future may look dark and foreboding. But through the storm someone comes. He is the light of the world. And he has come to take you home. He has come to be your saviour and to lead you safely to heaven. "I am the light of the world," he said, and we don't have to be afraid any more. Is it convenient for you to go with him? If not, do you think it ever will be?