

WHY NOT NOW?

"And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." Acts 24:25.

It is always interesting to know something of the personal characteristics of great men. In these days curiosity about such matters is amply satisfied by biography, journalism and photography.

Our text portrays a man whose career is one of interest and of warning. It pictures a man who started on the lowest rung and climbed to the top of the political ladder. However, he was a man of great energy and talent who wielded the power of a tyrant with the temper of a slave.

Paul's life had been threatened in Jerusalem. Under the protection of many soldiers and horsemen Paul had been rushed to Caesarea by the Roman authorities. There he was placed in the custody of Felix, the governor of Judea. Paul received a full hearing before Felix concerning the charges which had been preferred against him. This hearing convinced Felix that the Roman Empire was not endangered by this Jew, but he held Paul for further questioning. Later, he sent for Paul, evidently hoping to secure a bribe, and with Drusilla, whom he had enticed from her husband, he sat to hear what Paul had to say.

In this interview, as described in our text, I see four things:

I. A Distinguished Preacher.

Paul was a preacher with a distinguished ancestry, great native ability, good training, polished education, clean moral life, remarkable conversion, apostolic call, prepared message, courageous spirit and great spiritual power. Paul was not surpassed in native or acquired ability. He was a splendid match for the greatest philosopher of his day. Even though his limbs were manacled with the chains of a prisoner, his spirit revelled in a liberty which no tyrant could destroy and no prison walls could circumscribe. No audience ever had a better or greater preacher than Paul, except the one who listened to the preaching of Jesus Christ. Of all who have ever preached, Paul was second only to Christ. In his preaching Paul was sympathetic, fearless, courageous, uncompromising, heroic and faithful.

II. A Famous Audience.

One member of this famous audience to which this distinguished preacher preached was Felix, the governor of Judea. He was born in slavery, but he won his freedom early in life. Through rascality he had come into prominence and office. He was both an unscrupulous politician and a terrible grafter. In his personal life he was immoral and licentious. Lust, greed and inhumanity were stamped on his face. He was an inveterate procrastinator, an avaricious money-hunter, an extortionate and cruel judge, a crafty promoter of his own interests and an unprincipled trampler on the rights of others. Josephus said that Felix was the worst ruler who ever swayed the destinies of Judea.

Drusilla was the second member of this famous audience. Her ancestors had been notorious. Her great-grandfather, Herod the Great, killed the babes of Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus. Her great-uncle, Herod Antipas, slew John the Baptist. Her father murdered the Apostle James. Drusilla was married to Azizus,

the king of Emesa, when she was only fifteen years of age. A year later, after listening to the overtures of the wily and seductive Felix, she deliberately deserted her husband and lived with the governor in open sin and shame. Drusilla was attractive, beautiful, graceful, immoral and shameless. She was not only a woman of highly exalted birth and ripe personal beauty, but also of manifestly trifling disposition, deeply depraved character and palpably seared conscience. Felix and Drusilla were the biggest sinners in the whole country.

With time hanging heavily over this immoral, dishonest and cruel couple, quite naturally they wanted some new excitement, or somebody to amuse, entertain and help them to pass away the hours. Consequently, they sent for Paul. It matters little whether they sent for Paul out of idle curiosity, or out of a desire for material gain or because of hungry hearts. The important thing was the fact that Paul came. After all, a distinguished preacher addressed a famous audience composed of the two biggest sinners in the nation. Evidently hoping to receive a bribe, Felix sat with the woman, whom he had enticed from her lawful husband, to hear what Paul had to say.

III. A Model Sermon.

It is very interesting to note what Paul preached to this famous audience. He might have uttered some harmless platitudes or glittering generalities. He might have spoken words of flattery. Instead, he stood in the presence of this wicked couple, in whom was all that is dishonorable in human nature, and preached to them the truth which they needed to hear. He dealt with the sins of this self-indulgent and sinful couple who thought they could do anything they liked with impunity.

There are three things about Paul's sermon which are noteworthy and impressive.

1. The theme.

Paul's theme was "The Faith In Christ Jesus." He was the greatest preacher of his day and he preached on "The Faith In Christ Jesus" -- nothing more and nothing less.

2. The style.

Paul reasoned instead of ranting and beating the air. His message was logical, comprehensive, personal, practical and scriptural.

3. The divisions.

Three divisions stood out conspicuously in Paul's sermon. They were not thrown together haphazardly, but were logically connected, revealing a developing line of thought and one of great importance. The subjects with which he dealt are neither out of date nor out of place today.

(1) Righteousness.

Paul presented to them the righteousness of Christ -- the right, true and happy way of life, which was depicted by our Lord in word and deed and declared by Him to be God's will for all men. Having its root in the word "right," righteousness means a conformity to the will of God, or the full discharge of one's duties to both God and men. We must be concerned about what God would have us do, rather than with what will please the people with whom we live or with what will suit us.

Paul preached righteousness to a man whose chief business was to mete out justice. He talked to him about his failure to do his duty. It is always appropriate to preach to a man about his duty in his own occupation. A preacher cannot do his duty by dealing merely in generalities.

Felix was guilty of extortion in taxation, accepting bribes and living a life of open sin. Doubtless Paul sought to awaken his conscience by reminding him of the widows whom he had defrauded of their inheritances, the fatherless children who were left to beg their bread, and the many wrong decisions and unfair judgments he had rendered because of the bribes he had received. Paul reasoned of righteousness which neither member of his famous audience possessed.

(2) Self-control.

The word which Paul used here, which is translated "temperance" in the Authorized Version, means far more than total abstinence from the use of intoxicants. It involves the proper control of the whole person, with special reference to chastity. It means self-control or self-mastery. Self-control means the power to master, guide and direct all the forces of body, mind and spirit so as to attain the highest standard which we are capable of reaching. Inasmuch as Felix and Frusilla had given themselves over to unbridled lust, and had been living only to please themselves through the gratification of the desires of the flesh, Paul preached pointedly and personally to them about self-control, which was something that neither of them exhibited in the least.

(3) Judgment.

After preaching to Felix and Drusilla about righteousness, which neither of them possessed, and self-control, which neither of them exhibited, Paul proceeded to reason with them about the judgment to come, which they would never be able to escape. Doubtless Paul made it clear that unless they repented of their sins, for which they were inexcusable before God, the judgment to come would certainly catch them and they would be sent to hell. While listening to Paul, Felix visualized the great white throne, the books being opened and himself arraigned before the Great Judge Whom he had rejected as his Saviour.

Even though the judgment to come is left out of much, if not most, preaching today, it certainly was not left out of God's Word. This solemn note reverberates through the Bible. Neither was the judgment to come left out of Christ's preaching. Since the judgment to come is certain to catch us all, it behooves every one of us to be prepared for it.

Thus Paul preached a threefold message, namely, Christ crucified and righteousness by faith in Him, Christ risen and self-control by faith in Him, and Christ coming again and the judgment that would inevitably befall those who refused to exercise faith in Him. Paul's sermon was directly personal and intensely practical in its content.

IV. A Disappointing Result.

Gospel preaching is divinely intended to convince the intellect, stir the sensibilities and affect the will. Paul's model sermon was prepared and delivered

with a view to rebuking the sins, awakening the consciences, arousing the torpid spirits and meeting the needs of his sinful hearers. Addressing them as rational beings, Paul sought to enlighten their minds and to carry conviction to their judgments. But, after Paul had done his very best, even the marvelous sermon of that distinguished preacher produced a disappointing effect.

Why was the result of that model sermon disappointing?

1. Only one member of the audience was impressed.
2. That member of the audience was not improved. How was Felix affected by Paul's sermon, to which he listened so attentively?
 - (1) A Strange fear came over him.
 - (2) He was convicted of his sins.
 - (3) He realized that he was not right with God.
 - (4) He was stirred deeply.
 - (5) He trembled with fear of the judgment. When Felix understood the truth, quite naturally he feared the result. Therefore, in that crisis hour Felix trembled and shook. Think of that! Cruel, licentious, dissipated, debauched and wicked man that he was, this pagan governor was still a man who had been made in the image of God, made to hear God's voice and endowed with the privilege and ability of doing God's will.

"Down in the human heart,
Crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that
grace can restore;
Touched by a loving heart,
Wakened by kindness,
Chords that are broken
will vibrate once more."

That was what was happening in this case, A chord, which was far down in the depths of the heart of Felix, that had long been silent, was vibrating once more. The sword of the Spirit pierced that tender spot, underneath the crust, with the arrow of truth. Consequently, Felix trembled at the very thought of the judgment which was awaiting so great a sinner as he.

- (6) He procrastinated.
Instead of saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner," Felix said to Paul, "Go thy way for this time." That was the worst thing Felix could have done. Dismissing a preacher never destroys the truth.

Felix seemed to think that his being saved was just a very small matter, which he would be able to accomplish at any time. Many are like him in this respect today. But they are wrong. Salvation is never accomplished without the grace of God. He offers the benefits of His grace to you who are unsaved now, but you have no assurance whatever that His saving grace will be offered to you in the future.

Felix trifled with his golden opportunity. His procrastination was a guilty rejection because God sent the preacher, he rejected Christ, resisted the Holy Spirit and went on cleaving to Satan. He made the wrong decision when he yielded to Satan's appeal to postpone action. It is never safe for anybody to say goodbye to God.

Why did Felix shut the door of hope in his own face?

- a. For political reasons.
He thought that if he would keep Paul in jail that he would gain favor with the Jews. He was like many in our day who sell their immortal souls for the purpose of votes for an office.
- b. For financial reasons.
Felix hoped that Paul would give him some money to release him. He was selling his soul for the sake of getting money. The love of money was predominant with him.
- c. For social reasons.
There was not a Christian in the social circle in which he moved. His associates were not interested in morality, godliness or eternal life. He was not willing to be separated from that ungodly set.
- d. For sensuous reasons.
Felix was living in open adultery with Drusilla, and was not willing to give up his sinful manner of life and send her back to her lawful husband from whom he had taken her.

It is so easy to procrastinate. Man is a natural procrastinator. It is natural to put off until tomorrow what ought to be done today, especially if it is unpleasant or difficult. It is foolish to assign to tomorrow a value above that of today. The most valuable portion of time is today. In fact, it is the only portion of time of which we can be sure. God gives us great promises, but He binds Himself only to today.

It is dangerous to say that we will do this or that tomorrow or at a more convenient season because a different set of circumstances, state of mind or disposition of heart may render a right decision far more difficult. The truly convenient season for Felix was when God's voice was echoing in his soul, awakening his conscience and causing him to tremble with fear of what was coming.

3. This member of Paul's audience only promised. Felix said, "When I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." It is a common habit of people to lull an awakened conscience by putting off an acceptance of Christ until a more convenient season. Felix tried to quiet his aroused conscience by promising to call for Paul at a more convenient season for becoming a Christian. He failed by trusting to a future season. He got over his attack of spiritual appendicitis without an operation. His intention and promise with reference to the future were not worth anything. In substance he said, "You are right, Paul, but not now." That which is right cannot be done too soon. One always finds a convenient season for what he loves best. So, if he does not find it convenient to accept Christ and receive salvation, it is because he considers other things more important. The most convenient season Felix ever had was when Paul was urging him to receive Christ as his Saviour.

Not wanting or intending to die and appear at the judgment just as he was that day, Felix salved his conscience by a promise that at a future time, when it might be more convenient for him, he would send for Paul again and would consider this matter of his soul's eternal salvation.

Unsaved friend, no season will ever be as convenient for you as the present. Now is the right and the most convenient time that you will ever have to receive Christ as your Saviour. Moreover, it might be the only time. Do not remain any longer under condemnation when Christ has offered you forgiveness and salvation from sin. Do not put off welcoming your dearest and best Friend into your heart and life. Do not deprive yourself of the peace, joy, strength and blessings which He offers you now. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." Why not do it now?

"While we pray, and while we plead,
While you see your soul's deep need,
While your Father calls you home,
Will you not, my brother, come?"

You have wandered far away;
Do not risk another day;
Do not turn from God your face,
But, today, accept His grace.

In the world you've failed to find
Aught of peace for troubled mind;
Come to Christ, on Him believe,
Peace and joy you shall receive.

Come to Christ, confession make;
Come to Christ and pardon take;
Trust in Him from day to day,
He will keep you all the way.

Why not now? Why not now?
Why not come to Jesus now?
Why not now? Why not now?
Why not come to Jesus now?"