

## Acts 24:25

### **‘When I find it convenient, I will send for you.’**

One of the great excuses is, ‘I am sorry, I really don’t have the time’

- We can reply to someone, ‘I am sorry it’s not convenient right now’
- Without expecting them to say, ‘would you like to tell me when it is convenient?’
- I guess that this is not a new excuse – it was one used by Felix in the first century

Although we do not have much information about Felix in the Bible

- Secular history gives us some background
- Born a slave, Felix rose to high position because of his brother, Pallas
- Who somehow had become a favourite of the Emperor
- And had eventually appointed head of the imperial civil service
- Felix had been freed from slavery and later appointed governor of Judea
- A position in which he was a successor to Pontius Pilate
- The Roman historian Tacitus describes his rule in this way

With every kind of cruelty and lust, he exercised the authority of a king with the temper of a slave

Felix successively married three women of royal birth, each a princess in her own right

- One was the granddaughter of Antony and Cleopatra
- Another we know nothing about
- And the third was Drusilla, a Jewess, daughter of Herod Agrippa I
- Her father was the king who had put the Apostle James to death
- Her great-uncle had John the Baptist put to death
- Her great-grandfather had tried to kill the baby Jesus

Drusilla had been married to Azizus, king of Emesa, a small kingdom in Syria

- The Roman historian Josephus tells how Felix wanted her because she was beautiful
- And engaged the services of a Cyprian magician, Atomus
- To persuade her to leave her husband
- Drusilla was as captivated with Felix’s ruthlessness and power as he with her beauty
- His birth as a slave, his Roman paganism and her Jewish upbringing did not deter her
- The relationship seems to have been based on greed, lust and expectations of grandeur
- It was before such a governor and his wife that the Apostle Paul had to appear
- ‘Five days later’, presumably meaning five days after his arrest in the temple

Ananias, the high priest, instructed a lawyer, named Tertullus, to bring charges against Paul

- No doubt this was because of his expertise both in Judaism and imperial law
- Tertullus began his case for the prosecution with the customary flattery for the judge
- Jews would not really have been grateful for the ‘long period of peace’ or ‘reforms’
- In reality they had witnessed frequent displays of ferocity, cruelty, and greed

The case against Paul was that he was a troublemaker, stirring up riots among Jews

- That he was a ringleader of the Nazarenes (a rarely used but not unknown name)
- And that he had tried to desecrate the temple

Paul's defence needed to address those three charges

- That he was a troublemaker, stirring up riots among Jews
- That he was a ringleader of the Nazarenes
- And that he had tried to desecrate the temple

Like his adversary, Paul began with a complimentary statement, but both briefer and true

- Felix had been governor over Judea for a number of years, so had some experience
- In fact, if our timescale is correct, he had probably 10 years or more experience

Paul dealt with each charge in turn

- It was 'no more than twelve days ago' that he came to Jerusalem for worship
- He could scarcely have been a ringleader when he was on his own when arrested
- Their claim that he desecrated the temple was entirely without foundation

Paul insisted that the real reason was a religious one:

"I worship the God of our fathers, as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect - though I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked."

(Acts 21:14-15).

There were a number of familiar sects in Judaism, such as Pharisees and Sadducees

- Paul conceded that as his accusers say he is a member of the sect of the Way
- But contends that he believes everything that agrees with the Law and the Prophets
- The real issue is his belief in the resurrection of the dead
- Paul has one more point to make, he was tried before the Sanhedrin
- And even they failed to bring a charge against him (Acts 24:20)

Felix should have released Paul but he was reluctant to displease the Jews

- Like his predecessor, Pontius Pilate, Felix was first and foremost a politician
- even though he knew that Paul was innocent of any crime against the state
- Lacking any moral integrity, he decides the way to deal with things is to stall
- His disingenuous reason is that he will wait for Lysias the commander to come
- But Lysias had already written to Felix outlining his view of the case
- 'there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment'
- nevertheless, Felix, who was well acquainted with 'the Way' imprisoned Paul
- but, as a Roman citizen, allowed freedom for his friends to take care of his needs
- Felix's delaying tactics went on for two years
- and so began what, for Paul, would be a four year imprisonment

The concluding verses of the chapter tell us that Felix came with his wife Drusilla

- and sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus
- Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come

But Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you."

The fact that Felix was well acquainted with the Way points to:

I THE DANGER OF CEREBRAL CHRISTIANITY

The fact that Felix was willing to talk with Paul points to:

II THE DANGER OF COMFORTABLE CHRISTIANITY

The fact that Felix suddenly terminated his time with Paul points to:

III THE DANGER OF CONVENIENT CHRISTIANITY

I THE DANGER OF CEREBRAL CHRISTIANITY

Like many people, it seems that Felix enjoyed interesting conversation

- No doubt Paul had often been in a similar situation
- Most obviously at the Areopagus on Mars Hill in Athens, where:

All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

(Acts 17:21)

The opportunity for Felix to listen to a notable speaker of this new Jewish sect, 'the Way'

- Would have been an interesting way for him to pass some of his leisure time
- Important people are often interested in what religious leaders have to say
- Felix was well acquainted with 'the Way' and obviously had some interest in it
- For he was willing to listen to what Paul had to say
- There is no criticism of Paul here, "he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus" (24:24)
- But what is happening with Felix? And Drusilla?

It might still be the same in church today but it was the case in the first half of the last century

- In the era of the city centre churches and the great mission hall
- The preacher was the great attraction and with his supporting cast of soloists and choir
- Presented the sermon that was the top of the bill of the Sunday evening's attractions
- It was preaching in a popular style and great crowds went along
- I am not criticising the preachers, for I know for certain that many were men of God
- And I have not heard, let alone read, their sermons
- But the truth of the matter is that had the message really touched the hearers
- We would not have lurched into the post-Christian society
- In which we found ourselves in the latter half of the last century
- There was listening but no real engagement with the truth and with Jesus
- Older ministers called such congregations 'sermon tasters'

Today the scene has changed – there are very few 'big name' preachers with popular appeal

- A web search for famous preachers came up with Knox, Donne, Wesley, Spurgeon
- Sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century preachers!
- It would be an interesting exercise to conduct a survey in the street
- Asking people to name a famous Christian preacher of the twentieth century
- Who would they come up with? Over 30s might come up with Billy Graham

Today, even people within the church are not much interested in preaching and preachers

- Which is strange because people are still interested in religion and spirituality
- Recently I went to Professor McGrath's lecture at the University of Plymouth
- On *The Twilight of Atheism: The rise and fall of disbelief in the modern world*
- Now I have found a number of Professor McGrath's books very helpful
- So this is not a cheap shot at an eminent theologian
- Though I struggled to keep up with his erudite lecture it is a valid subject
- But the fact that the lecture theatre was filled with people
- Prepared to give Professor McGrath an hour
- When many of the same people would not give even a great preacher half that time
- says something about us
- to talk about God, to talk about religion, to talk about spirituality is fine
- it's all academic, all in the mind, all competing in the market place of values and ideas
- but modern society strongly objects on the Christian insistence of conversion
- the task of the preacher is to present the claims and Lordship of Jesus
- with the challenge to repent, to lead a new life under his Lordship
- Felix was well acquainted with the way and for his own interest gave Paul a hearing
- But that was all he would do
- Beware: THE DANGER OF CEREBRAL CHRISTIANITY

The fact that Felix was willing to talk with Paul points to:

## II THE DANGER OF COMFORTABLE CHRISTIANITY

In these later chapters of Acts we have three formal speeches from Paul

- Each mentions that he is blameless before God and the world (23:1; 24:16; 25:8)
- We cannot go into a long discussion of exactly what he meant by that
- But we can notice that the early Christians both outthought and outlived their critics
- At the Areopagus, Paul was a worthy debater with the philosophers
- Now, with Felix and Drusilla, Paul engages with a couple
- Whose ambitions have been fuelled by greed, lust and expectations of grandeur
- Felix listened to Paul as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus
- But Paul's discourse was not a homely, fireside chat
- For he spoke about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come

The great French Protestant preacher of the seventeenth century, Jacques Saurin (1677-1730)

- Comments that these were three subjects Felix and Drusilla needed to learn about:

We do not know what Paul said when he 'discoursed on righteousness'

- As a Jew, did he not speak of the rights to care of the widow and the orphan?
- Did he not say that kings and magistrates are to maintain the rights of the people?
- Did he not say that the design of the supreme authority
- Is to make the whole happy by the vigilance of one?
- And not to gratify one at the expense of all?
- Did he not say that it is meanness of mind to oppress the wretched?
- that nothing is so unworthy of an enlightened man as lack of respect for fellow man?
- that nothing is so noble as goodness and grandeur?
- Is not the exercise of righteousness on earth displaying the majesty of God?

We do not know what Paul said when he ‘discoursed on self-control’

- Did he not paint a picture of the effects of a life motivated by sensuous pleasures?
- Did he not demonstrate how this is the opposite of the spirit of the gospel?
- That it degrades the finest characters who have allowed it to predominate?
- Did he not show that lack of self-control renders the mind incapable of reflection?
- Did he not show to Drusilla that modesty and honour were better than she had?
- Did he not show to Felix that purity and integrity were better than he had?

We do not know what Paul said when he ‘discoursed on the judgment to come’

- Did he not show that the earthly order of things was passing and temporary?
- Did he not speak of a greater authority than Felix, or Caesar or Rome?
- Did he not speak of the future state and the solemn day of general judgment?
- That Felix and all who had stood before him, including Paul
- Would one day have to stand before a far more awesome judgment?

We know that as Paul spoke that Felix was afraid

- What an astonishing role reversal that was, the prisoner spoke with confidence
- And made the governor shudder, the captive stood before the judge who trembled
- What precisely made Felix tremble we cannot say, the Word convicted him
- The recollection of his past life, Drusilla (object of his passion, subject of his sin)
- He may have believed in the gods of mythology, incestuous Jupiter, lascivious Venus
- Now he was presented with a God who was holy and just before whom he must stand
- A God before whom the holy angels veil their faces – if previously he had been vague
- Now he was presented with an awesome, righteous God and judge – and trembled

The message of righteousness, self-control and judgment to come

- In former years we might have said, that these were familiar subjects to church-goers
- But today I fear these subjects are as unfashionable in the church as in the world
- If we have thought of righteousness at all it has often been given a negative twist
- Or relegated to simply being an abstract theory
- Self-control has little place in the ‘if-it-feels-good-do-it’ morality of the present age
- When any loss of self-control can be put down to misplaced love or faulty upbringing
- Or the judgment that is to come
- in a world that finds any notion of personal or corporate responsibility hard to face
- where we live in a ‘blame culture’ but wherever the blame lies it is not with me
- where any thought of personal accountability before a holy God is dismissed

Paul spoke to Felix and Drusilla about the necessity of faith in Christ Jesus

- but he also made it plain that this involved in change in their lifestyle
- Paul’s preaching touched their style of living
- Something that he said was too much for Drusilla for she never listened again
- Felix also was unhappy at the shift in the discussion from divergent religious views
- To personality and responsibility – the challenge was too much for him
- And he ordered Paul to stop, saying, ‘That’s enough for now!’
- When things started getting uncomfortable, Felix wanted Paul to stop
- see plainly then: THE DANGER OF COMFORTABLE CHRISTIANITY

Felix kept the door open saying, 'when I find it convenient, I will send for you'

### III THE DANGER OF CONVENIENT CHRISTIANITY

I think it would be wrong to make too hasty a conclusion about this

- Did Felix really want to hear Paul again
- Was he influenced by the reaction from Drusilla, who never listened to Paul again
- Was he just hoping for a bribe? We cannot say with any certainty

The challenge of a holy God who calls us to leave their sin behind was too much right then

- As the spiritual temperature increased, Felix began to tremble
- There was no room to be interested without facing the demand of the changed life
- Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret
- But worldly sorrow brings death (2 Corinthians 7:10)
- He either had to repent or get out of there – he chose the latter
- It was clearly the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8)
- Who convicts the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment

Jacques Saurin asks who Felix represents – those we consider wicked? Or people like us?

- Who are the people who have entertained thoughts of the gospel for a time
- But are now living just like other people?
- Ask them if they have renounced Christ and their salvation they will say 'no'
- And yet ask them how they will reconcile their hopes with their daily living
- And they say that they will change and that in due course they will make a start
- Isn't this the answer of Felix – on my terms and in my time

I share with you plainly – an incident from 20 years ago

- Walking home I met a young woman who had been an enthusiastic member
- But suddenly in more recent months she had not been seen at the church at all
- She felt a bit awkward meeting me in the street – I'll be back at church soon
- But then she went on with what so many people say – although I'm not at the services
- I still read the Bible and pray and do everything else I did before
- 'Surprised you say that,' I replied, 'in my experience, the services are the last to go'
- some years later I met a different young woman, who had moved into my area
- Having a commendation I was surprised that she had not been to any of the services
- When I called at her home, I discovered she was living with a non-Christian boyfriend
- As I began to speak to her, quite gently, about the claim of Christ on her life
- We got on well, I was a welcome visitor, but as I read the scriptures and prayed
- She began to cry – her boyfriend said, 'I never realised it meant so much to you'
- The upshot was, it mean a lot ... but not enough – some more convenient time

As Jacques Saurin says: 'Nothing is less wise than this delay'

- How do you know there will be a more convenient time to be right with God
- Who told Felix there would be more opportunities, assured him God would call again
- Only pride would assure any of us that we could meet God on our terms in our time
- Instead of saying 'Enough for now' – go away this time ... it has to be 'please stay'
- Stay, while the Holy Spirit knocks, stay while my conscience is troubled
- Stay, that right now, I may know faith in Christ Jesus
- Not in the future but from this moment on 'I will serve the Lord'