

THE WAITING GAME

ACTS 24:22-27 FEBRUARY 10, 2021

On November 11, 1939, the Centenary Gentleman (of Centenary College in Shreveport, LA) squared off against the Texas Tech Red Raiders in what is remembered as “The Craziest Game In College Football History.” The match would go on to set 13 NCAA records, despite the fact that it ended in a scoreless tie. It was the fourth rainiest day of the year and the field became a huge mud patch.

With “traditional offense ineffective at best, and dangerous at worst (due to injuries and turnovers, of which there were many), the best option for gaining field position was to [punt] and hope the returner...fumble[d] the ball. Both teams went all in on [this] strategy, punting a combined total of 77 times, with 67 coming on first down. During one stretch in the 2nd half, there were 22 punts in a row. The game ended with 30 yards of total offense (31 for Centenary, -1 for Texas) and a 0-0 score.”¹

If Governor Felix had played football, he would’ve been a punter. Throughout his story he is unwilling to make final decisions, not because he’s unable, but because he lived his life playing games. He played games in his career, he played games in his marriage. Often he played games with people’s lives. He was constantly involving himself in schemes to get what he wanted, despite the risks and potential for disaster. All along, the most dangerous game he was playing was with his eternal soul.

This passage has a lot to say about how gracious God is and gives we Christians encouragement about never giving up hope for the lost individuals around us. But *most* of all it is a message for those who do *not* believe. This is a cautionary tale, an urgent warning for you about the game you’re playing and the judgment you face if you will not accept Jesus Christ’s free offer of salvation.

When we left off, Felix the punter had just heard testimony against Paul and then his defense. We pick back up in verse 22.

Acts 24:22 - ²²Since Felix was well informed about the Way, he adjourned the hearing, saying, “When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case.”

From the start we see that Felix is playing the waiting game. It becomes very obvious that he doesn’t believe any of the charges against Paul - he didn’t think he was an insurrectionist or that he tried to defile the temple. But Felix wasn’t interested in justice. He was interested in his position. He doesn’t want to agitate the Jewish leaders, so he punts. There’s no need to have Lysias come down to Caesarea, he had already sent an official statement, giving his opinion of Paul’s innocence.

Some scholars believe the text should read like this: “When Lysias...comes down...and I can become more informed about The Way...I will decide your case.” That might be what he said, but it seems hardly believable that he, as governor of the region, did *not* have some understanding of Christianity. He had been posted in the region for 5 or 6 years. The whole Roman world was being saturated by this teaching. And *in* Caesarea, not only had there been an established church for 25 years, one of the most prominent Centurions in the city was a devout, Spirit-filled believer.

We also note that there’s no indication Lysias ever came or was even sent for. Felix was just trying to buy himself time.

¹ <https://www.ncaa.com/news/football/article/2019-11-11/craziest-game-college-football-history-77-punts-0-points-13-ncaa>

Acts 24:23 - ²³ He ordered that the centurion keep Paul under guard, though he could have some freedom, and that he should not prevent any of his friends from meeting his needs.

Felix didn't think Paul was a flight risk and it's clear he didn't think he was going to incite violence if his friends were allowed to visit him. As an aside - it seems unlikely that Cornelius would've been the centurion referenced here, though I suppose it's possible. But church historians *do* record that the second bishop in the church at Caesarea was named Cornelius.² Was it the same guy that we read about in Acts 10? We don't know. But we can be confident that his years of service in the Roman army and in the city would've led to *other* Christians, both in and out of uniform.

We've seen before that Paul was usually the one caring for his friends. On his missionary journeys he not only worked to support himself but those who traveled with him. But now, things are different. God has allowed this season in his life where there would be a lot less movement and activity. And now it would be *they* who would take care of *him*.

As an application: We want to be growing in our sensitivity to the needs of the Christians around us. In our culture we sometimes have this weird issue where we really *need* help, but we don't want to ask for it. And the more we need the less we ask for it. If you need help, come to your spiritual family. And if you see a brother or sister in need, find a way to be a part of meeting that need.

Acts 24:24 - ²⁴ Several days later, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and listened to him on the subject of faith in Christ Jesus.

For 20 years there has been an annual auction held on eBay to benefit a San Francisco charity. The item being bid on is a power lunch with Warren Buffet. In 2019 the lunch sold for \$4.5 million.³ If you can afford a lunch like that, I'm not sure you really need The Oracle of Omaha's advice, but that is neither here nor there.

What an amazing sit down this couple had with the Great Apostle. Just the 3 of them, maybe a soldier hanging around in the background. They come in and say, "Tell us about Jesus."

Before we get to that, let me tell you about this couple. Drusilla was part of the Herodian family. Her great-grandfather was the one who tried to kill baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Her great uncle was the one who killed John the Baptist. Her father was the one who killed James and then received worship and was struck dead by God (*in Caesarea*, by the way). Shortly before this passage, she had been married to a foreign king, but Felix had convinced her to leave him and become his third wife.

Felix, if we've forgotten, was not *just* a procrastinator, he was also a deeply corrupt man. He hired assassins to kill the high priest Jonathan. One source described the region during his term of office as being practically anarchy.

Now, what does their meeting with Paul show us? For one thing: Even deeply secular people have an eternal hunger, because God has placed eternity in their hearts. Felix had been a slave early in life and later became what was known as a freedman. From slave to governor. He had power and position and wealth. He got the prettiest girl, stole her from a *king*. And yet, despite all he had clawed out for himself, there was an itch he couldn't scratch. There was an emptiness inside of him that he couldn't avoid. It was deep down, but there all the same. What could this poor preacher,

² <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.ix.viii.iv.html>

³ <https://www.ebayinc.com/stories/news/glides-20thannual-ebay-for-charity-power-lunch-with-warren-buffett-sold-for-a-record-breaking-4-567-888/>

probably still black and blue from the beating he'd received, what could *he* have to offer? Yet, Paul was so full of hope, so full of peace, so full of God the Holy Spirit that Felix and Drusilla decided they *must* hear what he had to say.

What *did* he have to say?

Acts 24:25 - ²⁵Now as he spoke about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix became afraid and replied, "Leave for now, but when I have an opportunity I'll call for you."

Paul didn't just speak in abstract terms about the Lord. I'm sure he talked to them about who Jesus is and the story of His birth, death and resurrection, but he made it a point to speak to *them* directly about how the truth of the Gospel was going to impact *their* lives and futures. He talked to them about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come.

You see, Christianity is a comprehensive theology. It deals with the past, the present and the future. It's not enough for a person to try to be good *today*, because that cannot make a person truly righteous. "Trying" to be good right now cannot possibly wipe out the guilt of all the sins and all the imperfections of your past. To walk through death and be granted entrance to heaven on the other side requires *righteousness*. You must be perfectly holy in every way, just as God is holy. You can't have made one mistake, told one lie, taken one grain of salt that wasn't yours, had one envious thought. Think of it this way: If you were trying to compete in the Tours de France and they hauled you in for a drug test and found trace amounts of HGH in your system, you'd be thrown out and disqualified. It wouldn't matter if the guy next to you had more than you. It wouldn't matter if you said, "Sure, I took a dose of HGH but I wasn't blood doping!" You're guilty and ineligible to even put yourself in the race.

Paul looked at this couple, who cheated and killed and lied so often in their personal lives and their public lives and told them the hard truth: If you are not righteous you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He would've told them about how, as a Pharisee, he dedicated his entire existence to living a righteous life and he couldn't do it. Not even close. He would've told them there is *none* righteous, no not *one*. That they were sinners and the wages of sin is *death*.

So, their past condemned them. But what about today? What about right now? Paul preached to them about self-control. Perhaps the soldier in the background chuckled to himself as Paul talked to *this* man and *this* woman about dying to self and bringing their wicked hearts under dominion. The fact that they had called for this meeting reveals that they felt something was wrong within them. They knew they were lacking. They had everything they wanted, but inside it was never enough. They always craved more. Day after day they found themselves giving in to wicked desires and the worst parts of themselves. Even if they had *wanted* to do the right thing, they couldn't do it. Tacitus wrote that Felix "practiced every kind of cruelty and lust."⁴ Drusilla was no better. They might rule a region but they had no control over their own hearts. They were ruled by their cravings and their circumstances. Paul would've shared with them about how he had the same struggle before he was born again. But now that he had been saved, everything was different. He was content in *any* circumstance. He still had temptations to contend with, but now they couldn't overcome him anymore. Now, instead of being empty, God had filled him with joy and purpose and the ability to do what was good rather than be ruined by his own bad choices.

⁴ http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Histories/5A*.html

He preached to them about the judgment to come. A man like Felix had to worry every day that his sins would find him out, that he'd receive that summons to stand before Caesar because of some corrupt thing he'd. Paul explained that Felix didn't know the *half* of it. He said, "One day you're going to stand before the King of kings and you have no defense. You have wronged Him. You have blasphemed Him. You have committed constant acts of treason against Him and you will be judged." Christian theology isn't just about some present feeling. It's not like transcendental meditation where I go through some thoughts and beliefs so that I can have a more restful day with lower blood pressure. The days of this life are a drop in the bucket compared to eternity. Christ came that we might have life *everlasting*. He lived a perfect life and died on the cross in order to pay the debt we each owed. His work, His substitute, offered to us as a free gift, is able to cleanse us of all our guilt, give us power for living today and the hope of heaven.

They said, "Tell us about Christ," and Paul responded by explaining how, through faith in Christ, we are declared righteous, all our past dealt with, indwelt by the Spirit of Christ to empower us to live a transformed life and how He finished our judgment at the cross. Now, we look forward not to the *judgment* seat of Christ, but the *reward* seat of Christ.

We see that Paul's message hit its mark in Felix's heart. He was convicted and realized the trouble he was in. But in that moment of fear, rather than surrender, he rallied his forces and retreated. He took another turn in the waiting game. "Leave for now, when I have an opportunity, I'll call you."

Maybe someone listening has been playing this game with God. You feel that tugging in your heart. You feel the weight of your sin. Or you *have* felt it, but you keep punting and putting it off. "One of these days, I'll get right with God." It's been said, "One of these days is really *none* of these days." The truth is, you don't know if you're going to make it home tonight. You don't know if cancer is growing, undetected, in your body right now. God says, in His word, don't hear this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. *NOW* is the acceptable time, *NOW* is the day of salvation!⁵

The Philippian jailer, confronted with his sin, fell on his knees before Paul and said, "What must I do to be saved?" If you're wondering the same thing today, this is the answer: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Saving faith includes repentance from sin. That means you not only believe God exists and that Christ died to save you, but that you agree with Him that sin is what has separated you from God. And in that belief and agreement you make the choice to turn away from your sin and instead embrace the love of God that is being offered to you.

Felix wouldn't do it. And he missed out on the biggest, most valuable opportunity of his life. Maybe you heard about the British man who accidentally threw out a hard drive containing \$270 million worth of Bitcoin. Talk about a mistake.⁶ Felix was making the biggest mistake of his life. Not on accident but because he was unwilling to die to self. So he stuffed those feelings down, drowned them out with the same old earthly things that he always gave in to. Look at verse 26.

Acts 24:26 - ²⁶At the same time he was also hoping that Paul would offer him money. So he sent for him quite often and conversed with him.

Not only is this immensely sad, it shows us how Felix was trapped in this cycle of sin and bad choices. Though things were more lax out in the provinces, Roman law did not look kindly on this

⁵ 2 Corinthians 6:1-2

⁶ <https://www.wionews.com/world/british-man-accidentally-threw-out-bitcoins-worth-273-million-heres-how-he-plans-to-retrieve-it-357127>

sort of behavior. Taking a bribe was punishable by exile and confiscation of property. But he ran the risk, hoping to get a few extra bucks.

There's no indication he was ever as effected in his heart as he was that first time he met with Paul in verse 25. Again and again he sat and received personal teaching from the Apostle, but there's no record or hint that he ever turned to God. In fact, his behavior only became worse and he kept hardening his heart against the grace of God.

Acts 24:27 - ²⁷After two years had passed, Porcius Festus succeeded Felix, and because Felix wanted to do the Jews a favor, he left Paul in prison.

Felix is playing a new game now: I scratch your back, you scratch mine. Why did he want to do the Jews a favor? Well, a fight broke out in Caesarea between Jews and Greeks. Felix sent in troops, authorized them to use deadly force and *thousands* of Jews were slaughtered. Felix then encouraged the soldiers to loot the houses of the wealthiest Jews in the city.⁷ Afterward, the Jewish community filed a grievance in Rome. Felix was recalled, barely escaped with his life, thanks to the lobbying of his brother. Though he lived to cheat another day, it was not long after that he stood before a Judge who could not be bought off - the Judge of Heaven. Felix chose to enter the next life *without* Christ as his atonement. And because of his refusal he has suffering in hell as his forever sentence. That's not what God wanted for him. Look at all the Lord did to try to save this man!

Think about it: For two years when Paul could've been going through Asia or Europe or going to Spain like he wanted to, when he could've been planting churches in countless cities, God decided it would be better to have him talk to this guy and his wife. We see God's grace, not just generally, but that, God, in His grace, truly loves individuals. He *loved* Felix, just like He loved Paul and just like He loves you. He was willing to stand at the door of Felix's heart and knock time and time again. But Felix would not open the door. His example shows us some of the lengths God will go to in order to reach out to people. Undeserving people. But we see in Felix that God is not unkind, nor unjust. His grace abounds.

Some of those days must've been immensely frustrating for Paul. To think about what he *could* be doing instead of preaching to a brick wall. But there are lessons there for Christians, too. First of all: There's *no one* who is so bad God doesn't love them. Felix was a terrible man, but God wanted him. He wanted to save him and bring beauty from the ashes of his life. But second, there in verses 24 and 25 when we see that flicker of spiritual activity in his heart, it reminds us that even people who are completely immersed in wickedness *still* have a shot for salvation. Think of the worst, most corrupt politician in the world today. *Maybe* they're too far gone to respond to the Gospel, but maybe not. The Holy Spirit works even in the darkest of hearts.

We are also reminded that the Gospel is authoritative. Felix may have held the keys to Paul's cell, but Paul held the keys to the Kingdom. We need not fear any man, because we have the Lord with us and He has sent us out with His living Word to shine light in the darkness and cut to the heart of those trapped in their sin. Paul could speak with authority and confidence. He knew the truth. He knew the way to be saved. He didn't withhold it or try to manipulate or play any games. He offered this truth freely.

In the mean time, as you minister, don't lose hope and don't be weighed down by frustration and discouragement. Be led by God and trust that He knows the best use of us as we serve Him.

⁷ William Barclay *The Acts Of The Apostles*

