

## **“Later”; The Response of Felix**

Rev. J. J. van Ekeveld - Acts 24:25

Sing: Psalter 2: 1, 4  
Read: Acts 24:10-27  
Sing: Psalter 7: 1-3  
Sing: Psalter 383: 1-5  
Sing: Psalter 255: 3, 4

Congregation,

In this sermon we wish to focus on the words of Felix spoken to the Apostle Paul as we find it recorded in Acts 24:25 where we read, “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.”

In these words, Felix actually says to Paul, “Go away for now. When a more suitable time has come I will call for you.” Not now, but *later* ...

We will pay attention to the response of Felix: “Later”...

With the Lord’s help, we will consider three thoughts:

1. Felix Spoke After Having Heard a Serious and Soul-searching Sermon (for Paul spoke about righteousness, temperance, and the coming judgment)
2. Felix Spoke After Having Been Deeply Impressed (for we read that Felix trembled)
3. Felix Spoke While Responding in a Terrifying Manner (He said to Paul, “Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.” “Later ...”)

### **1. Felix Spoke After Having Heard a Serious and Soul-searching Sermon**

“Later” ... If you think about it, congregation, then this is a dreadful and very dangerous word. Let me mention a few examples. I think of those children who lived in discord with their parents and thought they could make amends “later”--but their parents passed away shortly after one another and “later” never happened.

I think of that seriously ill person who promised to read the Bible more often, to pray more regularly, and to attend church more faithfully upon recovery. “Later” ... but the illness worsened and there were no “later” opportunities. “Later” became “too late.”

I think of the young man who first wanted to enjoy the world and all it offers. First enjoy the fleeting worldly pleasures and “later,” he planned to focus on matters of eternity; later, he

would think about his conversion. But a car accident took him away from this life. It became eternity. And “later” became “too late.”

Congregation, you see that the little word “later” can be such a heart-breaking word. In Felix’s response to Paul we see the seriousness of delay. “Go your way, Paul, and later, when I have time, then I will call you again. Then you can bring this message again and then I will listen.” “Later!” But for Felix, “later” never came. It became “too late.”

Felix had been appointed governor of Judah by Emperor Claudius. Felix’s wife, Drusilla, was his third wife. She was a Jewess, a daughter of Herod, who had ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. This same Herod, we read in Scripture, later had been eaten of worms. Felix and Drusilla were two people who lived in sin. Flavius Josephus describes the gruesome deeds of Felix, and the well-known classical author Tacitus writes that Felix enjoyed cruelty and lewdness. Drusilla, his wife, was no better. She had at the young age of 14 been married off to Azizus, king of Emeza (which is the current Syria). King Azizus even had himself circumcised because his wife, Drusilla, originally was a Jewess. Later, with the help of a Syrian soothsayer, Drusilla was convinced to leave her husband and, instead, marry Felix, the Roman governor. She and Felix had only one son. Historians think that both he and Drusilla, his mother, died during the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the year AD 78.

Felix and Drusilla were two sinful people who allowed themselves to be led by their own evil passions and carnal lusts. But the Lord brought them into contact with the gospel! The Lord had His gospel preached to even these two sinners. He had His Word declared unto them because the Lord has no pleasure in the death of sinners. What an amazing wonder that the Lord, a holy and righteous God, is willing to deal with and save sinners. And He is the same throughout the ages; today He is willing to save you also--no matter how great your sins, no matter how deep your guilt. The Bible shows He was even willing to have dealings with Felix and Drusilla for also they received His Word through the preaching of Paul.

Didn’t we read in previous sections of Scripture that the Apostle Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem? When the Jews in Jerusalem plotted against Paul to have him killed, the Roman chief captain, Claudius Lysias, decided to have him brought to Caesarea, a city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was in this city that Governor Felix made his residence and where he first heard Paul speak. Paul had been brought to Caesarea to defend himself in Herod’s Judgment Hall against the orator Tertullus, who represented the Jews and who accused him of troublemaking. It was in response to this accusation that Paul delivered a short but powerful defense. Felix was clearly impressed and likely convinced of Paul’s innocence, because he treated Paul kindly and ordered that he would not be treated in a harsh way. He assigned a centurion to guard Paul and allowed Paul’s friends to visit him. Yet, Felix did not set Paul free.

Nevertheless, Felix expressed interest in Paul’s teachings and sent for Paul again so both he and his wife Drusilla could listen to Paul’s preaching, this time concerning the faith in Christ. And this is how these two people came into contact with the Word of God.

God’s Word can come to people in many different ways. It can come through the regular preaching, as many of us are privileged to receive it as we grow up under the Word. It can also come to a person who has not grown up under the regular administration of the Word, as was the case with Felix.

Paul spoke of righteousness and the coming judgment. We should keep in mind that Felix was an unrighteous person; he did not administer justice fairly. In Paul's case, despite his innocence, Felix did not set him free. In fact, Felix was open to bribery. In verse 26 we see that Felix hoped that money would be given him for the release of Paul.

In contrast to the sinful lifestyle of Governor Felix, Paul not only spoke of righteousness but also of temperance, in the sense of self-control and restraint. Both were foreign concepts to a governor who only gave in to his fleshly lusts and passions, who relished cruelty and together with his wife, lived in sin and adultery. And, yet, Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was given to speak this very pertinent message of righteousness and temperance to an unrighteous and intemperate governor.

This is how Paul, in his preaching, accused Felix of his sinful state. This is how Paul declared that the lives of Felix and Drusilla were in contradiction with the will of God. And this, too, is the declaration we receive from God’s Word: guilty before God. Do we realize that God’s Word also accuses *us* of our guilt before a righteous God? Today, that Word declares to us, “You are a sinner and your life is in contradiction with the Law of God.” And listen to the words of the Apostle Paul. His message is straightforward: We cannot escape this righteous God nor the judgment that is surely going to come. This message not only came to Felix and Drusilla; it also comes to us. There is a judgment to come! Christ will come to judge the living and the dead and, by nature, we will not be able to stand when the books of our lives are opened. The Apostle Paul attempted, as it were, to persuade Felix and Drusilla to come to faith in Christ, knowing the terror of the Lord. This serious and pertinent message delivered by Paul was only intended for their well-being and salvation. Paul called out to them, “We pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

The message to us is no different today. We, too, are confronted with the demands of the Law. We, too, hear God’s Word speaking of righteousness, temperance, and the judgment to come. We, too, are told: Who can ever stand before the holy God? We, too, are standing guilty before a righteous God.

Nevertheless, the Lord comes to us with the call to conversion, “Turn ye, turn ye, do not just live on like that!” We, too, may hear the preaching of the necessity of faith in Christ.

How do we respond to this message? What has been its effect in your life? Children, are you trying to listen to this message? Do you already have a new heart? Do you know the Lord?

And young people, how often have you heard this message? What has it done in your life? Are you saved? Know that the Lord will come back and take account of what you have done with His Word.

And what did God’s Word do in Felix’s life? That brings us to the second point in this sermon. When we pay attention to the word “later,” then we see that Felix spoke not only after having received a serious and personally applicable message, but he also spoke after having received a deep impression.

## **2. Felix Spoke After Having Been Deeply Impressed**

Do not think that the seriousness of Paul’s message was lost on Felix. In fact, Paul’s message made a deep impression indeed. The sharp light of God’s holy Word shone revealingly over Felix’s sinful life. Felix is deeply disturbed and affected by this message. No, he does not mock Paul’s message, nor does he laugh it off. Instead, it seriously impacts him and makes him fearful. We read that Felix “trembled.”

Congregation, it is a blessing when God’s Word does not pass us by but rather shakes us out of our complacency, when it leaves us with impressions, and when it touches us to the core.

Has this ever happened to you, boys and girls? Has a sermon ever affected you so deeply that you couldn’t ignore it, and that it stayed with you during the day and night? Did a sermon ever bring you on your knees? Older ones among us, did a sermon ever affect you in that way? Or does God’s Word just pass you by and are you sitting in church planning the activities of the coming week?

It is truly terrible if God’s Word passes you by and leaves you unaffected. This was, however, not the case with Felix. He was deeply affected. In fact, he was so afraid that he trembled. In light of his sinful life, the holiness and righteousness of God and the coming judgment filled Felix with fear. His soul shrank within him when thinking of the coming judgment. You would almost say that this man was not that far from the kingdom of God. Even as a pastor, it is satisfying to see that people are not ignoring the sermon’s message but are shaken up and disturbed.

Here we see, as it were, Felix standing before a split in the road with only two directions open to him. He has been shaken up by God’s Word and which direction must he now go? How will he react to Paul’s message? And how will you react to the message of God’s Word? There are only two possible outcomes; either you fall under the Word or you harden yourself.

There is no third option. God’s Word does not allow for neutrality. It is impossible to leave church in the same way that you entered it, for the Word has come to you again. If you did not fall under it and you remain unconverted, it will harden you.

Felix is now at this critical junction; he is standing at a spiritual crossroads, deeply affected, and fearful of the seriousness of Paul’s message. What will he do? Which way will he go? Would we not say, “Felix, fall at the feet of Jesus; pray to thy Judge for mercy and grace”?

And how is it with you, my dear listener? Have you heard sermons that left you disturbed and afraid? Were there sermons that made you fearful of the coming judgment? And what did you do at that time? Did you fall before God, or did you right yourself again in your own strength? Children, does it ever happen to you that at night in bed you think about the day that you must meet the Lord, and that you feel that you are not able to do so? You feel that you have a sinful heart, that you don't have a new heart. Do you lie in bed at night and push these thoughts away again? Maybe you feel it is better to think about more pleasant things like what you are going to do tomorrow with your friends at school? Is it not the same for all of us, both young and old? We push away the thought of pending judgment; we live past the moment and the concern. Is that the story of your life? Standing at the crossroads and ignoring the message?

There are people here today who, like Felix, have stood at the crossroads, deeply shaken by the Word of God. It may have happened under the preaching, or during a trying time in your life; it may have been at that traffic accident when everyone said that it was a miracle that anyone survived. And you felt it so clearly: The Lord had put you at these crossroads in your life; this was the Lord's doing.

There are people here today who, like Felix, have stood at the crossroads. But which way did it go? Be honest. It can only be one of two ways; there is no middle ground. Either you fell before God, or you remained standing in your own strength.

With Felix it went in the wrong direction. There was fear, but it was a slavish fear. You probably know what I mean. The fear of judgment, the fear of meeting God. But it was not that childlike fear which has love in the heart and a desire unto God. Such childlike fear drives you toward God, not away from Him. Felix had fear and anxiety, but no sorrow and grief. Not the kind of response that we read about in Psalm 116, “I found trouble and sorrow.” Felix had only fear and no sorrow. Sorrow is a result of the love of God that is poured out in the heart of a sinner. Then there is a heart-felt confession, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned.” And only then shall the Lord provide His wonderful comfort.

Before going to our third thought, let us sing from Psalter 383: 1 to 5.

*All that I am I owe to Thee,  
Thy wisdom, Lord, hath fashioned me;  
I give my Maker thankful praise,  
Whose wondrous works my soul amaze.*

*Ere into being I was brought,  
Thy eye did see, and in Thy thought  
My life in all its perfect plan  
Was ordered ere my days began.*

And what follows in the stanzas 1 to 5 of Psalter 383.

“Later” ... “Go thy way for this time.” Thus spoke Felix, first, after a serious and soul-searching sermon; and, second, after having received a deep impression; and now, thirdly, while responding in a terrifying manner.

### **3. Felix Spoke While Responding in a Terrifying Manner**

Felix stood at the crossroads. Which way should he go? Would it not be terrible if we were like Felix? For Felix tried to silence the inner voice of his conscience. Hence his response “later.” This time go thy way and later, when it suits me, “I will call for thee.”

“For this time ... go thy way.” Literally, it refers to “for now.” For the moment, Felix has heard enough. Next time, when it suits him better, he will call for Paul again. Then Paul may again preach the Word, but not right now; not now, but later.

Note, we do not read that Felix became angry under the serious and very personal message from Paul. Deep inside he is likely convinced that Paul speaks the truth and is concerned about his spiritual and eternal well-being. But he refuses to give in. “Now I don’t have time for this; today it doesn’t suit me to think about my eternal destiny, about my sins, and about the coming judgment. I will deal with this later; next time.” And so he tries to silence his conscience. He does not reject the call to conversion outright. No, he simply delays his response. Delay. Today is not the right time; he isn’t ready yet to deal with the crossroads. Later. There are so many other things that draw his attention. But later...

How do we view this? Is this a reason to have hope? After all, Felix does not reject the gospel outright. He does not malign Paul and declare his message to be utter nonsense. Not at all. And yet, congregation, what a terrible response! “Later.” Felix is trapped in the cords of Satan. The Lord has reached out His hands through the preaching of Paul, but Felix crawls away from the outstretched hands of the gospel. Felix is careful and diplomatic in his manner, but ultimately, he rejects the call for conversion.

Dear congregation, how often have you done the same? Have you, in a nice and polite manner, put aside the message of the preaching? Maybe when you left church you said, “That was a nice sermon.” A nice sermon; and then? You have a cup of coffee and you just carry on as usual. No, not yet, now is not the time; later, later. There are so many other things that need to be done, so many other responsibilities, so many other obligations. Later ... when I have time, when it suits me. On my time, rather than God’s time.

But when will it be a more suitable time? You are living proof that there was no such time last year, or last month, and apparently not today either. You say, “Not now, but later.”

Congregation, believe me; a more suitable time will not come later. Neither next week, nor next month, nor next year. Oh, you disagree? Congregation, don’t fool yourselves. Even if you would live another 20 or even 50 years, you would still say, “not yet, not now, but ... later.”

This is ingrained so deeply into our human nature; all we do is postpone and push it away from us.

“Later, when a more suitable time has come, I will call for thee. I will decide the right moment.” The right moment to be converted, the right moment to fall under the Word of God, when will that be? And you, young people, would you know when would be the best time to heed the Word of God?

The suitable moment is now! “Today,” it says in Scripture, “today, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.” Today, now, and not later, for tomorrow it can be too late. “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Now the Lord is knocking on the door--the door of your heart. But if you reject the Lord today, then there will come the moment that He will move on. Just as Paul moved on and left Felix behind, so also the Lord will let you go. And then what?

Paul spoke of the coming judgment. Congregation, we are all on the way to this coming judgment. And woe unto us when in that Day of Judgment we must confess to have rejected the gospel, and that the blood of Christ which was preached to us had no value for us. Then, in that Day of Judgment, we will not be able to stand. Then not only the wrath of God but also of the Lamb will be poured out over us. The Lamb who had been preached to us but whom we despised.

Oh, yes, how many are faithful church-going people? People who always faithfully attend church on Sundays and even weekdays when there are services. Yet, people who just as faithfully procrastinate their conversion. Later, later, or so they think. Always delaying, always procrastinating from the one day to the next, from the one year to the next. Always later, later, later, until there is no more “later.” When the only thing remaining is “too late.” Don’t forget that you can be taken out of this life in the blink of an eye, and then there is no more “later.”

For Felix the more suitable time he referred to in his answer to Paul never came. Maybe he met Paul later on but it probably had to do with money, as you can read in the following verses. When the initial impressions and fears were gone, Felix tried to make some money off Paul through bribery. Felix scorched his own conscience and he died in his sin. We know that Felix himself was recalled to Rome for a review of his mismanagement as governor. Drusilla followed him to Rome. Felix, in order to extend a favour to the Jews, decided to let Paul remain a prisoner in jail. Felix, in turn, was banned by the Roman emperor for his misdemeanors. And according to the historian Flavius Josephus, Drusilla and their only son died in AD 78 with the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

How disturbing, congregation. Given the opportunity and yet having chosen to delay, delay, delay. Always waiting for a more suitable time until it was too late. That little word “later” is a terrible word, even a deadly word. “Later.” How often have you not heard the Word of God?

How often have you had the opportunity for conversion? How often have you chosen to delay? Always procrastinating; not willing to repent. Then heed the words of Christ when He speaks to Jerusalem: “O, Jerusalem, ... how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matthew 23:37).

At some point it will be too late, eternally too late. And then, when the judgment comes, as Paul spoke of it, then the words of Luke will resound, “But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me” (Luke 19:27).

Congregation, let Felix and Drusilla be a warning unto you. Let God's Word admonish you. Do not delay any further because “later” will become “too late.” Think about what matters to the eternal welfare of your soul--what is there to lose? Nothing! Does it bother you to have to let go of everything? Congregation, consider what you can win--is it not everything? There is no better service than to serve the living God. Ask God's children and they will confirm it. The tears over sin are sweeter than everything the world can offer. And all the more so when the Lord shows you tokens of His love and grace in Christ. Then a single crumb off His table is worth more than a thousand worlds can offer.

Young people, it is so worth it to fear and serve the Lord. His service is a service of love. So, once again, my young friends, do not procrastinate. Do not say, “Later, later I will search the Lord in all seriousness.” Now, today, when you hear His voice, harden not your heart, but be willing to be led by His Word.

Congregation, all God's children will have the same confession: “Had it been up to me then it would have gone the same way as with Felix.” Then it would certainly have become too late. But then the miracle of God's grace: The Lord became the First in my life and that became the end of me. The Lord conquered me in His power. Then it became impossible to wait and delay and I became as Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, who left the City of Destruction. Christian did not say “later; later I will flee from this city.” No, it became a matter of immediate urgency; he had to flee NOW even though his wife and children thought he had gone mad. Christian could not stay for another moment in the City of Destruction; he had to leave NOW, for his life's sake.

This is what happens when God binds the necessity of salvation upon your heart. Then all of God's children will say the Lord was First. The Lord conquered me, for otherwise I would have continued as Felix. Then my “later's” would have become “too late.” And the greatest miracle of all is that the Lord made room in my life and heart for His Son, the one and only perfect Saviour.”

If that has been the case in your life, then on the coming Judgment Day it will surely be your gain. It will indeed be an eternal gain when Jesus Himself will say, “Come and inherit the kingdom.” Amen.



Closing Psalter 255: 3 and 4

*To the Lord, such might revealing,  
Let us come with reverence meet,  
And, before our Maker kneeling,  
Let us worship at His feet.  
He is our own God and leads us,  
We the people of His care;  
With a shepherd's hand He feeds us  
As His flock in pastures fair.*

*While He proffers peace and pardon  
Let us hear His voice today,  
Lest, if we our hearts should harden,  
We should perish in the way;  
Lest to us, so unbelieving,  
He in judgment shall declare:  
Ye, so long My Spirit grieving,  
Never in My rest can share.*