

## **“Later”; The Response of Felix**

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

Sing: Psalter 2: 1 - 5  
Read: Acts 24:10-27  
Sing: Psalter 112: 1 - 4  
Sing: Psalter 383: 1-5  
Sing: Psalter 255: 3, 4

Congregation,

In this sermon we wish to focus on the words that Felix spoke to the Apostle Paul as we find them 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 comes 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 Responded After Hearing a Serious and Soul-searching Sermon (for Paul spoke about righteousness, temperance, and the coming judgment)
2. Felix Responded After Being Deeply Impressed (for we read that Felix trembled)
3. Felix Responded 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 Responded After Hearing 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, upon recovery, promised to read the Bible more frequently, to pray more regularly, and to attend church more faithfully. “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 pleasures of this world 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 for 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 the Herod who had ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. This same Herod, we read in Scripture, was later 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. At the young age of 14 she had been married to Azizus, king of Emeza (which is the current Syria). King Azizus even had himself circumcised because his wife Drusilla 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 only had one son. Historians think that both he, and Drusilla his mother, died during the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the year 78 AD.

Felix and Drusilla were two sinful people who allowed themselves to be led by their evil passions and carnal lusts. But the Lord brought them into contact with the gospel! The Lord caused His gospel to be preached to even these two sinners. The Lord had His Word proclaimed to them because He has no pleasure in the death of sinners. What an amazing wonder it is 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 too --no matter how great your sins, no matter how deep your guilt. The Bible shows that the Lord was even willing to have dealings with Felix and Drusilla for also they received His Word through the preaching of Paul.

In earlier chapters we read that the Apostle Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem. When the Jews in Jerusalem plotted to have Paul 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 the Governor Felix had 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 Tertullus, the orator who represented the Jews, and who accused Paul of troublemaking. It was in response to this accusation that Paul delivered a short, but powerful defense. Felix was clearly impressed and most likely convinced of Paul’s innocence: we know this because he treated Paul kindly and ordered his soldiers to treat Paul with respect. He assigned a centurion to guard him, and allowed his friends to visit him. But, Felix did not set Paul free.

Nevertheless, Felix expressed interest in Paul’s teachings and sent for him again so that both he and his wife Drusilla could listen to his 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 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 must 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 in exchange for Paul’s release.

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 this governor who only yielded 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, in his preaching, declared that the lives of Felix and Drusilla contravened the will of God. And this, too, is the declaration we receive from God’s Word: guilty; guilty before God. Do we realize that God’s Word also confronts *us* with our guilt before a righteous God? Today, that Word declares to us, “You are a sinner and your life contravenes 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, knowing the terror of the Lord, attempted, as it were, to persuade Felix and Drusilla to come to faith in Christ. 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 today is no different. We, too, are confronted with the demands of the Law. We also hear God’s Word speaking of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come. We also are told: Who can ever stand before the holy God? Yes, we also stand 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.

And 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.

What did God’s Word do in the life of Felix? That brings us to the second point in this sermon. When we pay attention to the word “later,” then we see that Felix responded not only after having received a serious personal message, he also responded after receiving a deep impression.

## **2. Felix Responded After Being 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 on him 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. Rather, it seriously effects 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, leaves us with impressions, and affects 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 to 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 when 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 he thought of the coming judgment. You would almost say that this man was not 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 at a fork in the road with only two directions before him. He has been shaken up by God’s Word and which direction must he now take? How will he react to Paul’s message? How will you react to God’s message? There are only two possible outcomes; you will either submit to the Word, or you will harden yourself.

There is no third option. God’s Word does not allow for any neutrality. It is impossible to leave church as you entered it, because the Word has come to you again. If you did not believe it in truth, and you remain unconverted, it will harden you.

Felix is now at this critical juncture; deeply affected, he is standing at a spiritual crossroad and is 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”?

But 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 that as you lie on your bed at night, you think about the day that you must meet the Lord, and that you inwardly feel that you are not able? You feel that you have a sinful heart, that you don't have a new heart. But as you so lie in bed at night, do you just push these thoughts away? Maybe you feel it is better to think about more pleasant things such as 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? By nature we push away the thought of pending judgment; we push away the moment of concern and dismiss it. 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. It was the dread of judgment, the dread of meeting God. It was not the childlike fear which loves God and longs for His nearness. Such childlike fear draws you toward God: it does not drive you away from Him. Felix had fear and anxiety, but no sorrow and grief. He did not have the kind of response that we read about in Psalm 116, "I found trouble and sorrow." Felix had fear but 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 being deeply impressed; and now, thirdly, while responding in a terrifying manner.

### **3. Felix Responded in a Terrifying Manner**

Felix stood at the crossroads. Which way should he go? Would it not be terrible if we were like Felix? 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 now, 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 now; later.

And take careful note, we do not read that Felix became angry under Paul’s serious and very personal message. Deep inside he is convinced that Paul is speaking the truth, and is concerned about his spiritual and eternal well-being. But he refuses to submit. “I don’t have time for this now; today it is not convenient for 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 delays his response. Delay. Today is not the right time; he isn’t ready to deal with the crossroads. Later. There are so many other things that draw his attention. 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 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, do not fool yourselves. Even if you would live for 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 best time.” The right time to be converted, the right time to believe the Word of God, when will that be? And you, young people, do you want to know when the best time to heed the Word of God is?

That time 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 continue to reject the Lord, the time will come that He will reject you. Just as Paul moved on and left Felix behind, so the Lord will move on and leave you behind. And then what?

Paul spoke of the coming judgment. Congregation, we are all travelling to this coming judgment. And woe unto us when on that Day of Judgment we must confess to have rejected the gospel, and to have seen no value in the blood of Christ which was preached to us. Then, in that Day of Judgment, we will not be able to stand. And then not only the wrath of God will be poured out over us, but also the wrath of the Lamb. 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 on weekdays when there are services. Yet, people who just as faithfully delay their conversion. Later, later, or so they think. Always delaying, always postponing from the one day to the next, and 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 wore off, 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, let Paul remain a prisoner in jail. Felix, in turn, was banished by the Roman emperor for his crimes. And according to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, Drusilla and their only son died in AD 78 in the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

How disturbing, congregation. Given the opportunity and yet choosing 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 heard the Word of God?

How often have you been given the opportunity for conversion? But how often have you chosen to delay? Always delaying; 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.” Consider 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 the service of the living God. Ask God's children and they will confirm it. The tears over sin are sweeter than anything the world can offer. And all the more when the Lord shows you the tokens of His love and grace in Christ. Then a single crumb off His table is worth more than a thousand worlds.

Young people, it is such a blessing to fear and serve the Lord. His service is a service of love. So, once again, my young friends, do not delay. Do not say, “Later, later I will serve 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 of God's children will have the same confession: “Had it been up to me then I 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 the Pilgrim's Progress, who fled 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 just what happens when God binds the necessity of salvation upon your heart. Then all of God's children will say that the Lord was First. The Lord conquered me, otherwise I would have continued as Felix. Then also 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.*