



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 24: 1-27

Acts

"Missed Opportunities"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We're in Acts 24 this morning. We're going to look at the entire chapter, verses 1 through 27. Paul has been in Jerusalem. A plot on his life was discovered, and so he was taken out of the city by the Roman army, taken down to Caesarea which is on the Mediterranean Coast. It was the Roman capitol of the region where the governor of the region resided. And Felix, who was the governor, met Paul, and he promised him a hearing as soon as his accusers came down from Jerusalem, and that's what we read in verse 1 of chapter 24:

After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with an attorney named Tertullus, and they brought charges to the governor against Paul. After Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying to the governor,

"Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation, we acknowledge this in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness. But, that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing. For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. [We wanted to judge him according to our own Law. But Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands, ordering his accusers to come before you.] By examining him yourself concerning all these matters you will be able to ascertain

the things of which we accuse him." The Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so.

When the governor had nodded for him to speak, Paul responded:

"Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense, since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city itself did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot. Nor can they prove to you the charges of which they now accuse me. But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men. Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings; in which they found me occupied in the temple, having been purified, without any crowd or uproar. But there were some Jews from Asia - who ought to have been present before you and to make accusation, if they should have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves tell what misdeed they found when I stood before the Council, other than for this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, 'For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.'"

But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case." Then he gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and yet have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him.

But some days later Felix arrived with Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, "Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you." At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him. But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.

May the Lord bless this reading of His word and our study in it together. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for the occasion we have this morning to be gathered in this place, to open Your word and study it. We have much to be thankful for. We do approach this season of the year with special thanksgiving, and there is much for us in this land to be thankful for. You have blessed it abundantly. We have sung a hymn in which the glory of the world, the natural realm around us is praised, and there is much to praise in the beauty of this creation. It speaks of Your wisdom and Your strength and Your power and Your glory, and we give You praise for that, and praise for all of the good things that You have given to us. I don't know, Father, that there is a nation in the history of the world that has been blessed like this nation, with a material abundance, and with political freedoms and privileges. We tend to take all of those things for granted, but they are gifts from You and we thank You for all that You've given us.

And yet, Father, it's so often our hearts are stolen away by the material blessings of life, and we begin to focus so much on them. The great blessings of life are spiritual, and You have blessed us abundantly. You've blessed us in this church, Father. You have given this place a history of ministry of Your word that has blessed us here and people throughout the world, and we thank You for that and pray that we would continue to be used in that way, and we would be used that way this morning, as we are gathered here, as we consider the text that we've read, would be built up in the faith and edified as we consider the things that the apostle Paul did, the way he conducted himself in a hostile environment, and the things that he said as we consider his sermon, his brief discussion with two individuals. May we see the relevance of it all for ourselves as we consider the subject of righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come.

Father, there is a judgment to come, but by Your grace, You have delivered Your people from it through the sacrifice of Your Son. That, of all things, is what we thank You for. But You have blessed us abundantly in so many other ways. We thank You for the material things of life that You've given us. We recognize that they come from You. Every good and perfect gift comes down from above. We pray for those that are in difficulties, though, those that are in distress, those who face health

problems. We pray for Your blessings upon them, give healing, give encouragement. We pray for those who are grieving because of the loss of loved ones. Give them encouragement as well. Those who are simply weighed down by the cares of life, the difficulties of life. Encourage them and lift them up and build them up and build each of us up this morning as we consider our text. And we look at the apostle and we see him in great difficulty, and yet standing firm, standing boldly for the truth of Jesus Christ.

Bless us this evening as we gather together again here. We ask You to bless that meeting, as we take the Lord's supper, and remember His first coming, when He became a man and did so to live a perfect life in order to offer Himself up as the Lamb of God, as the sacrifice for sinners. And then remember that He's coming again. Maybe that day is soon. May we live in light of that coming. We live our lives in a way that is pleasing to You, and may we be found living a faithful, obedient life when He comes.

So bless us now Father as we sing our final hymn. May it prepare our hearts for our time of study together. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] We have an expression, "Opportunity knocks." The idea is: take it because sometimes it knocks only once. Our text, Acts 24, is a passage about opportunities taken and opportunities lost. Twice, Paul was given the opportunity to be a faithful witness, and he took both opportunities. Twice, a Roman governor was given opportunities to respond to the truth, and twice he missed them. And it is those missed opportunities that loom so large in this chapter. It is the account of Paul's third defense following his arrest in Jerusalem. The first was before the crowd in the temple; the second, before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem; and now he stands before a Roman judge, Felix.

In one sense, the trial is the most important aspect of the chapter because it shows again that Paul is an innocent man, and it reveals one more step, one more stage in his journey to Rome. But there is also a very personal dimension to the chapter which gives us one of those remarkable encounters that we find in the Bible: when the judge is put on trial.

He listened to Paul present the gospel. He heard him speak of righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, and he was deeply shaken. Luke writes,

"Felix trembled." But Felix did not repent. He was, as Dr. Johnson said, a victim of tomorrow. If today has slain its thousands, tomorrow has slain its ten-thousands. And that, I think, is the greater lesson of the chapter. It does show Paul's innocence and it instructs us in the historical details of his life in his journey to Rome, but the chapter also makes this appeal to the reader: not to put off until tomorrow the decision that is required today, not to delay obedience. It is an appeal that we find throughout the Bible.

In 2 Corinthians 6 and verse 2, Paul writes, "Behold, now is the acceptable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation." Not tomorrow. Today. There is an urgency about the Word of God, and danger in not responding to it today. When we have the opportunity.

Felix had a great opportunity. Felix heard the Word of God and he didn't respond. And so, he became a victim of tomorrow. Felix is an interesting character. His name means "happy" or "lucky," and he had a lot of what people might call luck. He was born a slave, but he was freed by the mother of the future emperor of Rome, Claudius. He grew up in the palace and made powerful friends. When Claudius did become the emperor, he appointed Felix to be governor of Judea in the year AD 52.

But Felix was a severe and repressive ruler. He brutally put down civil unrest wherever it occurred. As a result, he alienated the Jewish population even though he had a Jewish wife. She was his third wife. Her name was Drusilla. His first wife was the granddaughter of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, which gave him status with the Romans because it made him Antony's grandson-in-law. But his third marriage to Drusilla didn't help him with the Jews. They finally complained to Nero about his abusive rule and he was eventually deposed. The Roman historian Tacitus said of him that he "reveled in cruelty and lust and he wielded the power of a king with the mind of a slave."

Well, it was before him that Paul stood in the hope of receiving justice. Paul had been secretly taken from Jerusalem down to Caesarea by night when a plot on his life had been discovered. Lysias, the Roman commander, also sent a letter explaining the situation, a letter which exonerated Paul. Having met Paul and read the letter, Felix promised to give him a hearing when his accusers arrived in Caesarea. They arrived five days later. Ananias, the high priest, came with some of the elders. It was not an easy trip. The journey from Jerusalem carried them down through the Judea,

which are rugged, and then on to Caesarea, and Ananias was not a young man. So, as I say, it was not an easy trip. The fact that he made it, that all of these men came, shows their determination to see Paul convicted and punished.

To ensure that, they hired a lawyer named Tertullus to make their case. He was a professional orator. He was a man well-versed in the procedures of Roman law. The trial began with the prosecutor introducing the case with a lengthy speech in praise of the governor. Tertullus thanked Felix for the peace and reforms he had introduced to the region. William Barclay calls the opening statement almost nauseatingly flattering. Felix's policies were anything but praiseworthy. He had introduced peace by brutality and bloodshed. His reforms were rough justice. He was a cruel governor.

The Jews knew that. Tertullus knew that. Ananias knew that. The others knew that. But all of this played to Felix's vanity. It soothed his conscience, and it was primarily designed to win his favor. It was the way of the world.

Then after addressing the governor as "most excellent Felix," Tertullus brought the charges. There are three of them. The first one is political. The second two are religious. In verse 5, he calls Paul a "pest," a word that was more sinister than it sounds. It means a plague, a disease, and it suggested subversive activity. He's like a plague, they were saying, that is spreading unrest throughout the empire. That's the accusation. Paul, he said, stirs up dissention among the Jews throughout the world.

That was a serious charge because there were a lot of Jewish adjutators in the land at this time. In fact, Felix had trouble with a number of them, and Paul is here being accused of being one of those. He's accused of being a revolutionary, a threat to the Roman Empire.

Well, secondly , he accused Paul of being a heretic. He calls him a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. Now, the Romans recognized certain religions as being legal. Judaism was one. It was a legal religion. But others weren't recognized as such and they could not be practiced. Paul was charged with being one of those who was practicing an illegal religion. He was the head of an illicit sect they were saying.

Thirdly, in verse 6, he accuses Paul of profaning the temple. If anyone profaned the temple, it was those Jews who seized Paul while he was there worshipping. They tried to kill him in that place. But these were the charges they made. Three of them against the apostle Paul. Tertullus then concluded by assuring

Felix that he would find these things to be true by his own examination, and the Jewish men, the elders who were there with him, joined in, asserting that the charges were true.

Then, it was Paul's turn to respond. Felix motioned to him and Paul began his defense with a polite, but not a flattering, statement. Verse 10. "Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense, since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship." And with that, he dispensed with the first charge that he was a revolutionary. He'd only been in the country for 12 days. And during most of that time, he was in jail. He wouldn't have had time to raise opposition to the empire.

But not only was there not enough time for that to be true; there was no evidence to support the charge that had been made against him. Verse 12. "Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city itself did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot. Nor can they prove to you the charges of which they now accuse me." And so, Paul easily dismisses the first charge. It lacked logic and it lacked evidence.

Then he responded to the charge of heresy in verses 14 and 15, that he was the ringleader of an illegal sect. Without hesitation, he admitted to being a Christian. He wouldn't call Christianity a sect as they did. He referred to it as the Way, and he readily admitted to being a follower of it. But he argued that his beliefs were consistent with the ancient faith of Israel. He served the God of their fathers and believed the Scriptures. Everything that is in accordance with the law and that is written in the prophets, he said, he believed. And he shared the Jews' hope that there would be a resurrection of the dead, both of the righteous and the wicked.

So, his beliefs weren't novel. He was no religious innovator. There was nothing heretical about them. They were consistent with Jewish beliefs. Regarding the third charge that, that he had defiled the temple, he answered that in verses 17 through 21 by explaining the reason that he had come up to Jerusalem. He'd come up on a mission of mercy with a gift for the poor of the city. He entered the temple. Peaceably, he followed the rules of purification. There was nothing to the charge that had been made against him. The trouble that had occurred in the temple occurred because of some Jews from Asia. And Paul notes that those Jews who had made these accusations against him, they had not appeared at the court, which was in fact a

violation of Roman law. The only complaint that the Sanhedrin could make was his reference to the resurrection, which he had made at his trial in Jerusalem which was stated in the previous chapter when he stood and shouted out, "For the resurrection of the dead, I am on trial before you today."

That was a matter of theology. There was no crime in that, according to Roman law. With that, Paul concluded his defense. He was not a heretic. He was not a revolutionary. He was not sacrilegious. The charges against him are groundless and they were made without any evidence, without witnesses.

It was now left for Felix to render a verdict, one that either acquitted Paul or one that pleased the Jewish leaders. It was that choice that had Felix on the horns of a dilemma. He had grounds for denying Paul justice. Lysias, in his letter, had even found Paul innocent. But Paul was small potatoes. The Jewish leaders, on the other hand, were not. They could affect his career, and he wanted to have their favor. And so, faced with that decision, Felix took the middle road. He put off the verdict. Luke writes in verse 22, "Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the way put them off saying, 'When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case.'"

So, Felix knew about Christianity. It had a significant presence for some years in Palestine and in Caesarea. There was a significant church there in the city. Philip was a part of that. We've seen that in the earlier chapters of the Book of Acts. And so, he knew about Christianity. He knew about the way. He had an exact knowledge of it, and so he knew that the charges against Paul were inaccurate, that he posed no danger to Rome. His belief in Paul's innocence is indicated in the liberties that he gave to him. He mentioned in verse 23 he put Paul in the care of a centurion. But he was allowed to have visits from his friends who took care of his needs, so he was given a measure of liberty, but he was still a prisoner.

Felix's more exact knowledge about the way didn't result in Paul's release, but it did occasion another meeting between the two. Felix was interested in knowing more about the Christian faith. And so, some days later, he sent for Paul to speak about faith in Christ Jesus.

Felix was accompanied by his wife, Drusilla. She was a Jewess, the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, and their marriage was surrounded by scandal. It was based upon lust and intrigue and was the stuff of supermarket tabloids. Drusilla had a reputation as a great beauty. Felix was her second husband. She had been married

before to a petty king in Syria when she was very young. But when she was 16, Felix met her and he fell in love with her. According to Josephus, he, with the help of a magician from Cypress, seduced her and persuaded her to leave her husband. He promised her all kinds of happiness. In fact, there seems to be a pun on his name. Felix, which means happiness, or joy, and luck, and promised her just that. He promised her happiness if she would accept his offer, and she did just that. She became his third wife which was not the righteous thing to do, but there was very little in her family line that would've encouraged righteousness in her life. Her father, Herod Agrippa, murdered James in order to please the Jews. The Lord later slew him when he accepted the adoration of men and refused to give glory to God. Luke records all of that back in chapter 12.

Her great uncle was Herod Antipas who was the king of Galilee during the time of the gospels, the one whom Jesus called "that fox." He stole his brother's life and he killed John the Baptist. Her great grandfather was Herod the Great who killed the children of Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus.

That was the family of Drusilla, not the kind of family that had a particularly good influence. She was about 18 at this time. She was the daughter of the Herods, and yet there seems to have been some interest on her part to hear Paul. Now, it may have been nothing more than idle curiosity or the prospect of being entertained, but it gave rise to the greatest privilege of her life: to hear the apostle Paul explain the Christian faith.

It was really an amazing meeting. Paul was clear and uncompromising in his explanation. He didn't give some detached, dispassionate lecture on what Christians believe. He gave a personal, three-part sermon on righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come. It was a lesson both people needed to hear. It began with the central issue for everyone, what all people need if they are to be acceptable to God, and that is righteousness. Everyone lacks it. No one can produce it. But without it, we cannot see God. So how do we get this righteousness. How do we obtain a right standing with God? How can a man be right with God? That is the question that Job asked. It is the great question of life. There's no more important question than that. How can a man be right with God? And the answer that Paul gave all through his ministry, the answer that we find all through the Bible from beginning to end is: not by law keeping, not by works, not by human effort and good deeds or noble character

or upbringing or pedigree or heritage or anything like that. Righteousness is God's gift to the sinner. It cannot be earned. It is imputed at the moment of faith. It is the righteousness of Christ that we receive as a gift the moment we believe.

That is justification. God's act of declaring a sinner just. Not making the sinner righteous, not changing the sinner's character, but changing the sinner's status, his standing. It is God's act of pronouncing that the believer is in right standing with His law, and fully accepted by Him. That's justification. That's the great theme of the Book of Romans, which Paul had written just a few months earlier while he was in Corinth. The just shall live by faith. And so, Paul explained to these two sinners how helpless sinners can be righteous in God's sight. It's by means of God's grace as a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ.

Then he spoke of self-control to a couple who had no self-control but who lived lives of lust, cruelty, passion. Paul explained how justified sinners are then sanctified, given self-control, enabled by the Spirit's help to live lives that measure up to the righteous standing that they have with God, to live with discipline, to live with godly behavior.

That's different from justification. Sanctification and justification differ from one another. Justification is a declaration. It happens in a moment. It is completed at the moment of faith. A person cannot be more justified later on than he or she is at the moment of faith. It is complete. It is a definite act that is eternal. A person who believes in Jesus Christ is declared righteous in God's sight at that moment and forever. Completely acceptable to God.

From that moment on, though, because that person is declared righteous, the work of sanctification begins. That is a progressive work. That is the work in which God changes our character. Justification changes our standing. Sanctification changes our character, our thoughts, our actions, our deeds. It produces different people. We become confirmed to the image of Christ so that our life does begin to measure up with that righteous standing, that declaration that God has made in justification. This is the discussion that the apostle Paul had with these two people, these two sinful people. He didn't address Felix, and he didn't address Drusilla the way Tertullus had. He didn't flatter either one of these people, even though he knew full well that they controlled his freedom. These are not people you would want to offend. This would've been a time of flattery, if that was to be done.

But Paul did not do that. He spoke to sinners about their sins. What he spoke to them about was no more popular then than it is today. He spoke to them about self-discipline and the lack of it, and sin, and all of that. But then, he becomes even more bold when he told them of the judgment to come. At his trial, he had stated his belief in a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. Resurrection of the wicked is a resurrection to judgment. That's Paul's final point. Sin has consequences. The consequences are eternal, and the only way of escape is through Jesus Christ who suffered the judgment for His people. That is the central idea of Paul's discussion here. He spoke to them about faith in Christ Jesus.

Paul's three-point sermon can be described in what is sometimes called the three tenses of salvation. Past-tense, present-tense, and future-tense. I am saved, past-tense, at the moment of faith when I am justified and delivered from the penalty of sin now and forever more. Once the sinner is justified, declared righteous, he or she will never suffer the penalty of sin. I am saved, past-tense. I am being saved, presently, through the process of sanctification which delivers from the power of sin. Finally, I shall be saved in the future from the presence of sin with the resurrection. And then that day, I will be perfect, without blemish, before the Lord God.

That's putting Paul's three-point sermon positively, but there was a negative aspect to it. He did lay stress on judgment. It is the consequence of unbelief. God is loving, and His love is infinite. It is unconditional. But God is also just. He's absolutely righteous and He cannot compromise His righteousness. He cannot compromise His justice. He must punish sin. Either punish it in the substitute, or punish it in the sinner. And the day is coming when all wrongs will be made right. We look at the world around us and we sense the conflict that the psalmist Asaph had in Psalm 73 when he wondered why is it that the wicked prosper and the righteous seem not to?

We have that sense about us. We look at the world and we're grieved by what we see. We're upset by what we see. But the fact of the matter is: someday, all wrongs will be made right and it will be made right, they will be made right by the judge of all the earth. All men will stand before Him, who is holy and righteous, and they will give an account for themselves.

This is what Paul spoke about. Paul solemnly warned Felix and Drusilla that their lives will be judged by the God of this universe. You can be sure he didn't

preach at them with a scolding tone. This wasn't an angry sermon. He was gentle. He was concerned. Paul was a soul-winner. He wanted this couple to know Christ, wanted them to believe in Him. He wanted them to escape the wrath to come. Paul's great concern was for the sinner. He crossed continents. He crossed seas. He suffered all kinds of hardship and difficulty in order to win people to Jesus Christ, Jew and Gentile alike, and he was seeking to do that here with great concern, great compassion, he told this couple about their sin, about their condition, about their need of righteousness, about the judgment to come in order to bring them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

But he could not do that in a compromising way. He could not soft-sell the gospel. He gave them the doctrine of the Christian faith. He explained to them what Christians believe. He explained to them the theology of Christianity. He did all of that, but he did that by also bringing out the ethical implications, the moral implications of all of this, that we are sinners. That's why we need a Savior. The Savior is divine. He is the Godman. He had to be the Godman in order to pay an infinite price for an infinite penalty. There's life and righteousness through Him and Him alone. Those who do not believe face the judgment to come.

He explained all of this, and he did it in a way which was very personal and said, in effect: this is true, Felix. This is true, and it is true for you. What effect all of this had on Drusilla, Luke does not say, but Felix was deeply affected. Luke writes that he became frightened. Or as the King James Version puts it: Felix trembled. Righteousness, self-control, judgment, he heard these subjects and his conscience began to accuse him. He was guilty. He knew he was guilty. He knew that he faced a crisis. He faced a moment of decision. Paul made clear the need of faith in Christ, just as he had made clear his own innocence a few days earlier at the hearing.

But just as Felix had put off a decision about Paul, he put off a decision about Christ as well. Trembling with fear, he stopped Paul and he said, "Go away for the present, and when I find time, I will summon you."

That was the time. Second Corinthians 6:2. "Behold, now is the acceptable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation." That was Felix's day of salvation. It was his opportunity. He heard the truth. It made an impact upon him. He trembled and he made a conscious decision to turn away. Go away. When I find time, I will summon you.

But Felix never again found the time. Oh, he met with Paul again. Luke tells us that, that he, over the months, would meet with him and converse with him, talk to him about various things. But he was never again troubled by what he heard. He never again trembled. That day had passed. Instead, he asked for money. He was interested in Paul for that reason. His interest in him was venal. It was not spiritual. He tried to gain bribes out of the apostle Paul. His heart was now hardened.

The chapter ends two years later with Paul still in prison and Felix, replaced as governor. He disappears from Luke's account and eventually from life, a lost man, as far as we know.

The Bible is filled with warnings against the response of Felix, that kind of response. In Hebrews chapter 4 and verse 7, we read: today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts. It is the warning not to become a victim of tomorrow. Today is the day of salvation. We don't determine it. We don't determine that. God does. Christ comes as He wills, and He visits souls, and that visitation is the time of opportunity. That is the time to respond and not delay, not to fool around and put it off. There is an urgency about the opportunity to respond to Jesus Christ, and that is true of everyone.

It's true for young people. They might think that they've got plenty of time to think about Christ and think about eternity and all of that. That seems so distant. It seems so unreal to a young person. It's hard to see much more than beyond the next weekend. Time seems to stand still. They're young. They'll always be young. That's the way it seems, and so it's hard to have a sense of urgency. They can think of those things later, not today, not now. Youth is a time for pleasure and a time in which to enjoy the many things in this world to enjoy.

Augustin spoke like that when he was a young man. He said, "Give me chastity, but not yet." He was afraid God would hear him and heal him of his lust and he didn't want that. He wanted to satisfy his lust, not lose it. How typical that is. We think that the world has more to offer us than Christ. And I say "we." I think us, as Christians, I assume the best here. We're Christians. We're believers in Jesus Christ. But look at your heart. Think about your thoughts. Who do you give your thoughts to during the day? Jesus Christ or the things of the world? So often our minds are led captive by the allurements of this age and the materialistic things around us. We are

in a very wealthy, materialistic age, and so often we think, whether consciously or not, we think that's what's really important.

Now, if that's true for the people of God, what about those who are unbelievers? Why, they feel without a doubt it's better to submit to our passions than it is to obey the Lord of life. Better to look after pleasure than anything else. Well, it may not be pleasure that causes a person to delay in his or her thinking about the ultimate things, about eternal things. Maybe the interest is not pleasure at all but business, and a man says, "I'm too busy right now with my work to think about those things. I'm too busy providing for my family or making my way to give time to that. Someday I'll have the time. Someday I'll retire. I'll be able to sit back and reflect on all of this, but not now. I'm much, much too busy." And so he puts it off.

The rich fool in the Lord's parable did that. You remember the story. He was a man who busied himself with expanding his business, building more barns, preparing for retirement. But retirement never came. No sooner had he finished his work and began to take his ease than the Lord God said, "You fool. This very night your soul is required of you." And he was snatched away. None of us knows how many days he or she has in this world. This may be your last day.

Felix didn't die that day. Years passed, but his interest in the gospel died that day. We are not sovereign over these things. We cannot command our hearts or our convictions. God comes, God speaks, He addresses our hearts, He stirs us up, He brings conviction, He knocks at His choosing, not yours, not mine, at His choosing. That's the opportunity. That's the time to believe. That's the time not to delay. The opportunity for Felix came and went.

There are other men like Felix in the Book of Acts. In the next chapters, we read of Festus and Agrippa. Each of these have been likened to ships at sea that emerge for a moment from the darkness as they cross the moonlight's path, then are lost again in the darkness. These men had a great opportunity. For a moment, they came under the light of conviction, but they hesitated then disappeared into the darkness forever.

I think history is filled with men like that. There is a story about Aaron Burr. It's a story I've heard in various forms, but a story in which he recalled a critical moment in his life when he was young. Aaron Burr was a man of great privilege. He was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards and a brilliant student at Princeton University.

We know him for his infamous political career. But while he was a student at Princeton, a great revival swept the campus, and he attended an evangelistic meeting and felt the need of God's mercy and felt that he should give his heart to Jesus Christ. But he hesitated and he left without doing it. Outside, he looked up toward heaven and said, "God, if You don't bother me any more, I'll never bother You." And later in his life when he told the story, he said, "God has kept his part of that bargain. He has never bothered me." It's said that Aaron Burr lived without God and died without friends.

God's will is always done. Make no mistake about it. He is sovereign in these matters, and His will cannot be thwarted or frustrated. Christ will not lose one of His sheep. He said that, He promised that. It is true. But men are responsible. You and I are responsible. Our decisions are significant. They matter. They are real. They have consequences. And when God's will is known, we are to respond to His will. The Book of Acts also gives us examples of people who did that. Acts chapter 16, we have examples of that with Lydia, whose heart was opened by the Holy Spirit as she listened to Paul preach the gospel. And then later in that passage, we have the Philippian jailer. He too trembled and asked Paul, "What should I do to be saved?" Paul said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ." And when he said that, the jailer did. He responded and his household followed him. He didn't put off to a more convenient time his faith. He believed at that moment. He didn't wait for tomorrow.

May God help us to not delay, to respond when we hear the truth. I'm speaking now to Christians. I'm speaking now to men and women, young people and old people alike who have believed in Jesus Christ. We can do that too. We can put off the opportunities that we have today in various ways. We have opportunities to believe the truth of God. We read it in our texts of Scriptures as we read the Bible or read some other book or discuss things of truth with friends, and we hear things that don't fit with our natural way of thinking, and we want to reject it naturally. But if it's what the Bible teaches and we understand the teaching correctly, we are to believe it whether we like it or not. And there are many things in the Word of God that we may not like, but if we come to understand them and know them, we will rejoice in them. But the opportunity comes to hear, to listen, to believe, and we're not to shut that off. We're to respond in obedience to the Word of God. Obedience of the mind with the obedience of faith. But then the opportunities come as those with the apostle Paul,

opportunities to stand as witness for Jesus Christ, we're not to neglect those. We're to take those, seize those opportunities and be faithful witnesses.

God enables us to do that. May God help us to do that. May God not let us become victims of tomorrow. There's no standing still in the Christian life. We're either progressing or we're regressing. We're either going forward in our knowledge and in our obedience or we're regressing. We're going backward. To seize the day, we're to go forward in obedience.

But we may have some attending this morning who are not believers in Jesus Christ. If that's the case, then consider Paul's three subjects: righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come. Someday you must stand before the judge of all the earth and give an account for your life. Do you think that you can stand in your own righteousness? Do you think you can stand before the Lord God as a good citizen, as a faithful husband or wife, as someone who's tried to do his or her best in business, or school, or whatever? You may be able to measure up well with someone else. The person standing next to you, or your neighbor down the street, but you will be standing before the absolutely holy God who can tolerate not one sin. The fact of the matter is, no one can stand before God in his or her righteousness. You need the righteousness of Christ, and you have that through faith in Christ and through faith alone. He died in the place of sinners so that all who believe in Him would escape the judgment to come. And the man or woman, the child who puts his or her faith in Jesus Christ at that moment is declared righteous, declared acceptable, clothed, as it were, in the righteousness of Christ, and treated as Jesus Christ Himself by the Father.

So, if you're here without Christ, you are here without His righteousness. Believe in Him, trust in Him. The moment you do that, you receive the forgiveness of sins, you receive the righteousness of Christ, you receive life everlasting. May God help you to do that and help each of us to take the opportunities that God gives us to learn, to grow, and to serve. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for Your blessings to us. We thank You for this text of Scripture in which we see two different men who both had opportunities. One took the opportunities; the other did not. Father, may we be like the apostle Paul and may we take the opportunities You give us to grow in the faith and to serve You. May we not be like Felix. If there be any attending this morning who don't know

Christ, may they not be like Felix, may they not tremble and then turn away. Cause
them to tremble. Cause –