

Steadfast Global

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 March 2018

Preacher: Steadfast Global

[0 : 01] Well, let's turn back to Acts chapter 24. Acts 24, if you have your Bible. I'm going to read a few verses, but I'm not going to read from your pulpit Bible, if you'll forgive me. I'm going to use the English Standard Version just for this short reading, and I'll explain why in just a moment. So Acts chapter 24, and we'll read again from verse 24. And some days, after some days, Felix came with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned, not discoursed, reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, go away for the present.

Felix was alarmed. Now, when I came to look at this passage, two lessons just emerged very, very quickly for me. And I'm going to break from the pattern that perhaps you're used to by sharing the application from the passage at the very beginning rather than at the very end.

So there are, as I said, two key lessons. Now, the reason I want to do that is because I want you to hold the lessons, just hold them in your mind as we work through the verses, because I think it might speak to us. Perhaps there are some here who it'll speak to quite explicitly.

The first lesson that we get from these verses 22 to the end is that there is a solemn warning here in the passage for the person who keeps coming into the presence of Jesus, who keeps coming in, but who refuses to bow the knee to him. Now, I want to be crystal clear about that so we all understand what I'm talking about. So let me give you a little analogy. It is like a person coming into a cake shop or into a bakery, going into Greg's every single day of life. In you go, you walk in, and you admire the pastries, and you look at the cream cakes, and you can smell the coffee. It's wonderful. You love going in. You're so drawn to going in, and yet you never buy anything.

You just turn and walk out day after day, week after week, and month after month, and you just keep doing it. Are you that type of person this evening? Are you the type of person that comes into God's presence? I'm not just talking about church. I'm talking about in your home, wherever it is, you're aware of God. You have an attraction to King Jesus. But yet, for whatever reason, you refuse to bow the knee to him. You will not have him as your Lord. If that's you, listen to the passage, please. Now, the prayer is, I've said it again and again, more than once in both prayers, Lord, will you open our hearts? And the prayer is that God would open all of our hearts, that there's something here for all of us. But if you're the person who keeps going into the cake shop and never buys the cake, please listen and ask God to open your heart. Now, the second lesson that we see in the passage, as I understand it, relates to God's faithfulness in equipping his servants in difficult situations. Perhaps as I was reading the verses, you were thinking, Lord, well, this is just so unfair. It's such an injustice. Why is Paul imprisoned here? And you're absolutely right.

[4 : 04] It's totally unjust. It's just not fair at all. And as I read the passage and the wider section, it's one part of a longer story, it dawned on me that Paul has spent, it seems, two years in prison.

Two years. He's done nothing wrong. But he's in prison and he's in limbo. And that spoke to me. It spoke to me because I saw similarities between Paul's situation and the situation of another man that I'm going to speak about at the fellowship afterwards. A man from the Czech Republic called Peter Jacek. Maybe some of you have heard of his story. He was imprisoned for two Christmases in Khartoum in the Sudan. Now, what was God up to? What is God doing? What was God doing in Paul's case? What was he doing in Peter's case? Why did this, why did he allow this to happen? Well, in Peter's case, God was working to refine him, just to show him who he was and his purpose. And it started very badly for him. He found himself cast into a cell with some Islamic State sympathizers. But it ended gloriously.

Now, I'm not going to tell you how it ended. If you want to hear how it ended and you don't already know, then I'll tell you afterwards at the fellowship and I'll show you some pictures.

Suffice to say, going to the lesson in the passage, God proved himself to be faithful to Paul in the midst of his suffering. And we know that Paul's ministry was going to be difficult, so it was all the more important that God would be there to encourage him and help him in his difficulties.

Now, just by way of further introduction, as we look towards the passage that we are going to be looking at, let me just give you, explain to you some of the circumstances that led Paul to be in prison on this occasion. Back in chapter 20, we see him telling his friends at Ephesus that he feels a sense of drawing to go back to Jerusalem. But it's more than a sense of drawing, it's a compulsion.

[6 : 21] I know in my heart that God is leading me to go back to Jerusalem. He begins the journey, he goes to Caesarea, he goes into the home of Philip the Evangelist, and Philip has daughters who have a prophetic gift. And then Agabus, another prophet, comes down, takes Paul's belt and binds his own wrists. And he says to Paul, the person who owns this belt, this is what's going to happen to him if he continues on on his journey. Philip's daughters are also saying, don't go. And they're weeping and saying to Paul, please don't go to Jerusalem. But Paul knows that God is calling him to go. Have you ever been in a situation where you know in your heart that God is asking you to do something, but it makes no sense to the people around you? The people you love are saying to you, no, don't do it. I don't think it's right that you should do this. But you know in your heart that what God is asking you to do, you must do it. Paul went to Jerusalem. And there he made himself known to James, who was one of the prominent leaders in the church. James sets him a course of action that he must undertake. And he does this obediently. And then he comes into conflict with the religious leaders of the day. And eventually then he's under a death threat. He's rescued from that by Lysias, the tribune of all people. And he's taken under armed escort back to Caesarea, back to that place where his friends were weeping for him not to go. Please don't leave us. And Paul finds himself back there. Well, that takes us then to verse 22 in the passage. And here we see that Felix is a very shrewd man. He understands what's really going on, reading between the lines. And we're told that he listens to Tertullus. Tertullus is the representative of the Jews who's laying out the charges against Paul. And then he turns to Paul and he says, well, what do you have to say about this?

That's fine. But then look at verse 22, as I said, Felix has a rather accurate knowledge of the way. What does that mean? Well, what that means is that Felix has head knowledge of the Christian faith.

That's what the way was. Those who followed Jesus were known as followers of the way. So that is an interesting thing. He understands a little of the faith and clearly understands what's going on. So he, to placate the Jews, he sets the case aside and says, I will reserve judgment until this man, Lysias, comes down. Lysias, the man who plucked Paul from this angry crowd, took him into custody, examined him, found nothing to substantiate the charges, and then sent him up to the governor, Felix, with a letter. And in that letter, he told Felix that he has thoroughly examined Paul and he's found nothing to merit imprisonment or death. We read about that in Acts chapter 23.

So here then we find Paul, a prisoner of Felix, and again looking at verse 23, one who is allowed a bit of liberty. He's allowed a degree of freedom, and he's also allowed to have his friends come and bring him food and whatever else he needs. Now that second part isn't in itself very unusual because that was what was done in the day. And it's still the case in many countries where it doesn't matter if you're a Christian or whoever you are, if you find yourself in prison, there's an expectation that your family and friends will care for your needs. They will come with food, they will come with whatever it is that you require. But I do think it's interesting that Paul is allowed a degree of liberty. He's allowed to come and go a little. Why is that? Well, we'll come to that. Who would have visited Paul?

Who would have? They're good questions. Well, surely the people who would have come to visit Paul in prison were the very same people who said, don't go in the first place. Please don't go. Terrible things are going to happen to you if you go to Jerusalem.

[10:57] Perhaps Agabus came. Philip would have come. Philip's daughters would have come. And I'm sure over the course of two years in prison, they came many, many times. There's a point there. It's a point that somebody else made, someone far better than me. 16th century, hundreds of years ago, John Calvin, the reformer, made an interesting remark about this verse and the actions of these people. And I want to share it with you. Calvin said, therefore, let us learn by this example that so long as we may and are able, we must not defraud the martyrs of Christ of any manner of comfort whilst they labor for the gospel. Did you get that? We must not defraud the martyrs of Christ. We must not. We must give them what they need as they labor for the gospel. Now, for me, in the work that I'm doing, I find that tremendously encouraging. That's what we're doing. We try to help those who are in prison for their faith, those who are suffering for their faith. But Calvin wasn't talking to me. Calvin was talking to his congregation. And in a sense, it was a word for the future as well, because the same word applies to you this evening. It applies to all of God's people. If we choose to ignore the cries of God's people, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, we do Christ a great disservice. We do him a great disservice. You know, I like the words of the psalmist. It's so beautiful the way the psalmist puts it in

Psalms 56 and verse 8. We read there in that passage of God storing up the tears of God's people in a bottle. Isn't that beautiful? The picture is beautiful. Our tears, your tears, if you love Christ tonight, and you're going through a difficult time, the tears that you shed, whether it's for something going on in your home, in your family, with your husband, or with your wife, or with your son, or your daughter, whoever, your tears matter to Jesus. And that should encourage us.

We have a great opportunity to serve one another and serve the suffering church, even just by praying for them. Turning into verse 24. After some days, Felix, I think, begins to show his hand. And if I can draw again this analogy from the analogy of the cake shop, Felix comes into the cake shop. Remember what I was saying there? It's someone who has an interest, and they keep coming in, but they always walk back out again. He comes into the cake shop with Drusilla, and turns out that Drusilla is a Jew, a Jewess, but she's not any old Jew. She is quite a prominent Jew. Her father was Herod Agrippa, and Herod who had James, the brother of John, beheaded. Herod who cast Peter into prison. This is who she is.

Now, why would she want to come and listen to Paul? Well, maybe she knows, like, a bit like Felix, she knows something of the way. Well, what is the way? The way is an interesting religion, focusing on the teachings of this man, Jesus. Jesus, wasn't he the one, again, as I said in the prayer, who touched the leper? Wasn't he the one who sat with the woman at the well? Quite unorthodox.

This is not the way people should behave. Drusilla was involved in an adulterous relationship. Drusilla had left her husband in order to take up with Felix, the Roman governor. Drusilla, perhaps, was a little bothered in her conscience. Perhaps Drusilla was hoping to hear something, some words of comfort from this unusual teacher of an unusual faith called Paul. Well, she didn't get words of comfort, not immediately anyway. What do we read? We read that Paul spoke to them, both of them, about faith in Christ Jesus. Now, that's the clue that we have, that Felix is interested in the gospel. As I said, he's coming into the cake shop. He's looking. Why would I say that? Well, because remember, Paul is a prisoner. If you're a prisoner, you don't speak unless you're spoken to.

[15 : 47] Paul wouldn't just stand up there and say, well, I want to tell you about Jesus. He wouldn't do that. He would say, he would wait until he was spoken to, and then he would speak about what he was asked to speak on. Paul, I certainly expect that would be the case. Paul spoke to them about faith in Christ Jesus. If I asked you this evening to speak about faith in Christ Jesus, what would you say?

What would you say? Where would you start? Now, if you asked me to speak about faith in Christ Jesus, I think I would probably begin with my testimony. I would tell you who I was. I would tell you what kind of person I was. And then I would tell you that I met with Jesus and that my heart was changed.

And I think that that's probably what Paul would have done again. It's perhaps a little speculative, but when you think about just chapter 26, a couple of chapters on what he says to King Agrippa and his wife, he gives them his testimony. Paul tells them who he was, or rather who he thought he was.

There was nobody like Paul. He was the greatest of the Pharisees. The law, nobody could beat him. You had a question about the law, you would ask Paul. He would have the answer. He was a magnificent man in his own eyes. And then he met with Jesus on the road to Damascus and he realized who he actually was.

He realized that he was actually nothing. He realized that he was a persecutor. That he thought he was serving God, but he wasn't. He was watching his people, God's people die.

[17 : 40] And then perhaps he would say, and then let me tell you what I became when I bowed the knee to Jesus. That's why I'm here today. I'm in chains. I'm imprisoned because the Lord Jesus Christ has changed my heart.

But you know, as much as Paul is passionate about telling people what God has done in his life, he also has a huge concern for the people God is sending him to. So I don't think for one minute he would have just stopped there. And we know from the passage that he doesn't. In verse 25, he gives them quite a sermon. He reasoned, not really discoursed, he reasoned about righteousness. And that has the same meaning as justice.

So Paul stood there and spoke to him about righteousness and justice. He reasoned about self-control. He reasoned about the coming judgment. So let's understand this clearly.

Paul didn't just discourse. He didn't just stand there and let me chat to you a little bit about righteousness. Well, this is what I think about righteousness. What do you think about righteousness? That's not what he did. Paul gave a concise and logical argument about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment. And by the time he was finished, we can be very sure that Felix and Drusilla understood their responsibility to look to the God of heaven, to bow the knee to Jesus, to ask for forgiveness for their sins, and to turn and walk a different road.

I have no doubt in my mind this is what would have happened. Now, we don't know actually what he said. We're not told. It's certainly about righteousness. But we know something of what Paul thinks about righteousness. We know that because of what he wrote in the early chapters of Romans, Romans chapter 3 in particular. In Romans chapter 3, Paul contrasts our lack of righteousness as men and women, humanity, with the perfect righteousness of God. Now, what does he say? Well, I wonder, will you bear with me?

[20 : 10] Will you bear with me as I share with you what Paul said in relation to righteousness in Romans chapter 3? This is what he said. None is righteous. No, not one. No one understands. No one seeks after God.

All have turned aside. Together they have become worthless. No one does good. Not even one. Our throats speak death. Our tongues deceive and are filled with poison.

Our mouths are full of curses and bitterness. Our feet are swift to shed blood. The path we are on leads to misery and ruin. We don't know peace. And then Paul finishes by saying, there is no fear of God before their eyes. That's pretty severe, isn't it? I wonder if you're thinking, well, actually, when I think about that, when I think about society, broader society, later on, I'll be speaking about the work we're doing in northern Iraq. Well, if you were to ask me, when you read these words, what do you think of?

Well, I would say to you, I would think of Islamic State because of how dark and how wicked these men are. But in actual fact, the words are just as relevant to me. This is a picture of me. It's a devastating and desperate indictment of my situation, my heart before a God who is pure and righteous.

What a mess we're in. And I realized then I've got absolutely nothing to give to God. I come looking for forgiveness and I can give him nothing. I've got nothing to say to him. Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to the cross I cling. Naked come to thee for dress, helpless look to thee for grace. Foul I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die. I've got nothing to give to you. And if you'll forgive me, nor do you. We've got nothing to give God. Nothing.

[22 : 27] Now, in stark contrast to that is God's light, his holiness and his justice. And I think that's what Paul would have been speaking to Felix and Drusilla about.

He would have, if we, I'm not going to quote it, but read on from Romans 3, 21 to 31, and you'll read there more about what Paul says about God and how righteous he is. But let me just say this. If we want to live a righteous life, it means that we live for God and not for ourselves.

We live for God, not for ourselves. Then we're on the right road. Now, having knowledge of the law would have surely caused Drusilla, this Jewess, to squirm. She'd have been uncomfortable because she would have recognized that her life has fallen so far short of what Paul has said. Maybe you feel the same way. Maybe you think of those words that I said, and maybe you'd say, well, to some extent or another, you know, what he said is actually right about me as well. Maybe if it wasn't so embarrassing, you would just get up and walk out. Maybe that's the way you feel. Well, listen, if that's the way you feel, I want you to think of a fine bottle of wine, a fine bottle of wine. How do you get it?

In order to get it, you have to bruise and crush the grapes. I would far rather that God expose how bad I am inside with his soul objective being that I would be restored through the blood of his son than have him gloss over all that's wrong in my life just for the sake of being sensitive. I don't want to offend you. And then your soul would be lost forever. It's a serious game. It's a serious business.

Paul was making it, laying it bare before Drusilla and Felix. Well, the second thing Paul reasoned about was self-control and how close to the bone this was for a couple who were living the lives in total abandon. What would he have said about that? Again, we're not told, but let me quote a couple of verses to you. John 1 John chapter 1 verse 6. If we say we have fellowship with him with Jesus while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked, the same way that Jesus walked in. We are to be imitators of Jesus. And that means we are to have self-control. Do you ever think about the suffering of Jesus? Do you ever think about what he endured? Do you ever think about Christ going to Gethsemane and weeping there? We're told his sweat is just great drops of blood. Do you ever think about the horror of the soldier's quarters where he is beaten and abused the praetorium? Do you ever think about how the humility, how Christ was humbled and just degraded by being put on the cross? Well, why did he do that? Did Jesus go through all of that so that I and you, if you follow him, might not exercise self-control? No, he didn't. He went through that so we might exercise self-control, that we would be careful about the way we live our lives. We must have self-control. The third thing Paul reasoned about was the coming judgment. So what can we say about this? Well, this is what I'll say. Make no mistake about it. Jesus is coming again. He is coming again. And it isn't Jesus the lamb.

[26 : 41] Well, well, well, well tried these cliches, aren't they? Not the lion, but the lamb. Not the lamb, but the lion. Jesus is coming again. Jesus is not coming as the lamb. He is coming as the lion. He is not coming as a teacher. He is coming as the judge.

Hard, hard, hard words. Hard words. Nobody is going to escape his scrutiny. And you know, I look around and I see, and myself included, I see a church that's just riddled with compromise.

Now, conversely, I serve Christians who are prepared to lay down their lives for their faith. Now, the suffering church, and again, I don't like differentiating there because there's only one church.

The branch of the church that I serve are willing to lay down their lives for Christ. That is because they understand the importance of living in a godly way for him.

Do we? Do we? Is that what people see? And I speak now to those of us who are Christians. Is that what people are seeing? Is that our testimony? Do people look at us and say, what is it? Why are you different? Why do you not do this? Why do you go to church? What does it mean for you?

[28 : 09] Let me tell you? Let me tell you? Let me tell you. Let me tell you what he's done for me. No wonder. No wonder Felix was alarmed. I wonder are you alarmed?

See, there were three things about Felix. This was the heading of the sermon. Felix was attracted to Paul's message. He wanted to come into the cake shop.

Felix was affected by Paul's message. But it was in a very negative way. Because, thirdly, Felix was unchanged, wasn't he?

To our knowledge, he didn't change. He didn't change his ways. He just carried on the way he was going. He couldn't take any more on this occasion, though.

Perhaps his conscience has just been torn apart. And he sends Paul away. I can't take any more. Just go. And then in verse 26, we read, He calls for him again often.

[29 : 13] He's hoping for a bribe. But the bribe isn't going to come. Sorry, the bribe isn't going to come. Listen, Paul has integrity.

But he keeps calling him in. And he keeps conversing with him. What's he talking about? All of these occasions that Paul keeps asking him to come back, what are they talking about?

See, Paul has only one thing on his mind. Christ. He kept coming in to the cake shop. He kept admiring what was on offer.

And then his time ran out. Do you see that? His time ran out. Because Felix had a reputation for taking bribes.

Felix was subject to many a complaint from the Jews. They would send their letters of complaint to Caesar. And eventually Caesar acted. It's time for you to move on, Felix.

[30 : 19] It's time for you to go. And even though Felix knew about Paul's innocence, and even though he understood now something more of Paul's God, he just wasn't interested.

His final parting shot, instead of bowing the knee to Jesus, his parting shot was to try and gain favor from the Jews by leaving Paul in prison. What a situation.

What a man. Well, in closing then, back to these two lessons. Start with the second one. The lesson, as I see it, is that God is wanting to encourage his people.

Do you see that? Paul was in prison. That's not so good. I don't want to be in prison. But while you're in prison, I will come to you.

While you're in prison, I will feed you. While you're in prison, I will remind you that people care about you. While you're in prison, you will do great things for me.

[31 : 35] Don't give up praying in the middle of your trial, whatever it may be. Only God knows what your trial is tonight. Don't give up praying in it.

Trust God to work. Trust God as you're praying for the person you love. Oh, how long, O Lord? How long before he or she bows the knee to Jesus?

How long? Don't give up. What was the first lesson? There is a solemn warning in the passage.

Are you the person who keeps coming into the presence of Jesus?

Again, and again, and again. And you refuse to bow the knee. You're attracted to him. There's something about this that really draws me.

[32 : 40] And yet, you refuse to bow the knee. Will you walk out again tonight? Now, that's an awful solemn way to finish.

But listen. Listen. Felix had one last chance. And then his time ran out. Don't let that happen to you.

Don't let it happen. Trust Christ for a new beginning. A new life. And then you'll be with him for all of eternity.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we think of the situation before us. And we think, Lord, of all that Paul endured. But we see your hand there.

And we thank you, Lord, for your faithfulness. We don't know where Felix and Drusilla are tonight. It's not our business. But what we do know is that you are the God who leaves all men without an excuse.

[33 : 47] And that's what you did with them. And that's what you're doing with us this evening. So, our Father in heaven, we just pray that those, if there's anyone here who is drawn to you, Lord, please give them that strength and the grace to bow the knee finally, fully, to the King of glory, Jesus himself.

And, Lord, we just thank you again for the promise that you will never leave us or forsake us. We thank you that even in our darkest valleys, we are still able to call out to a God who hears us and who loves us, who cares for us.

So, Lord, again, as we leave now from this place, we just thank you that you're the wonderful God who listens to prayer, who answers prayer. So, receive our glory, our praise and honour and be glorified.

Now and forever. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.