



The Danger of Delay

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

George Whitefield was the Billy Graham of the 1700's. He was an evangelist who preached to hundreds of thousands in America and England during what is called the First Great Awakening. He was also a casual acquaintance with Benjamin Franklin. Franklin heard Whitefield preach many times. Prior to his death, Franklin wrote an autobiography and reflected on his relationship with Whitefield. He wrote:

"In 1739 there arrived among us from Ireland the Reverend Mr. Whitefield, who had made himself remarkable there as an itinerant preacher. He was at first permitted to preach in some of our churches; but the clergy, taking a dislike to him, soon refused him their pulpits, and he was obliged to preach in the fields. The multitudes...that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was matter of speculation to me...to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers, and how much they admired and respected him, despite his common abuse of them, by assuring them that they were naturally half beasts and half devils. It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro' the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street."

So began Franklin's account of his dealings with George Whitefield. Franklin called himself an impartial witness to Whitefield's ministry. He confessed, "He used to pray for my conversion, but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard."

Isn't it interesting how a person can reflect so matter of factly and nonchalantly about matters of eternal consequence? There are people today like Ben Franklin. The Christian faith is a subject of fascination to them. Perhaps they observe the positive difference it seems to make in people's lives. They might even recommend it to others. But somehow when it comes to their own lives, they remain uncommitted. Maybe they just figure that it's not the right time for them; maybe later; maybe another day. It's funny how we make decisions like that and then our decisions turn around and make us.

Much like George Whitefield, the apostle Paul had an experience with a man similar to Ben Franklin. His name was Felix. Like Franklin he was an important man who prided himself on his breadth of knowledge and open mind. He was used to people pandering to him, and maybe this is why Paul was so intriguing to him. Paul was different; he seemed fearless; Paul told the hard truth regardless of who was listening.

Turn to Acts 24. We saw last week how Paul was moved from Jerusalem to Caesarea, narrowly escaping a

Jewish plot to kill him. He's now in Roman custody. He's been brought before Felix, the governor of Judea, for a hearing. Felix put him under house arrest until his accusers could arrive from Jerusalem. Five days later they come and they're ready to present their case to Felix. They brought an attorney named Tertullus; a hired gun; a skilled orator who knew how to argue a case.

I. Tertullus: A Nauseating Flattery (vv.1-9).

Tertullus begins in a fashion typical of one coming before a man like Felix. He starts with nauseating flattery. **"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"** (vv.2b-3). I don't about you but this is enough to make me sick! The thing about it is that everyone there knew none of it was true. The fact is Felix was a brutal ruler. The Jews despised him. I'm sure even Felix sat there and thought, "What a bunch of baloney! Would you just stop and get on with it?"

Finally he gets around to stating his case against Paul. **"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"** (vv.5-6a). He makes three accusations against Paul. First, he says he's a pest and troublemaker who spreads turmoil and disorder among the Jews everywhere he goes. He throws this out there because he knows the Romans were always concerned about maintaining order in the Empire. Second, he says Paul was a ringleader of a sect called the Nazarenes. Christians were called Nazarenes because they followed Jesus of Nazareth. But notice he calls this a "sect" because it has overtones of a group on the fringe; like calling it a cult. Paul's not just the "leader" but the "ringleader." He's the one whipping up this troublesome heresy. And third, he says Paul tried to desecrate the temple. This was a serious charge because the Romans allowed the Jews to prosecute people who did that. But it wasn't true. If you look back at ch. 21 you'll see they didn't arrest him for that as he says here, but the mob had fallen on him and a Roman commander had to intervene and save his life.

Luke says in v.9 that the rest of the Jews with Tertullus sort of chimed in and then they were done. Then Felix looked at Paul and nodded for him to speak. Now it's Paul's turn.

II. Paul: A Blameless Conscience (vv.10-21).

Paul begins in v.10. **"Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my**

defense,..." You'll notice right away that Paul begins respectfully but without the sickening flattery of his accusers. He acknowledges that Felix has been governor over Judea for awhile. He has experience. He knows this nation. Paul felt that would work in his favor.

Then he gets on with his defense. By the way, I take it from this that it's okay at times to defend ourselves. It's not always the right thing to just be quiet and let people walk all over you. What Paul does is he takes each of the three accusations and deals with them in order.

First, he says he's not troublemaker. Look at vv.11-13. **"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."** In essence Paul says he hasn't had time to stir up all the trouble they accuse him of, at least in Jerusalem. It's only been twelve days since he arrived there. Five of those days he was in Caesarea under house arrest. That gave him less than a week. How much trouble can you stir up in a week? Then he adds during that time he wasn't even debating or lecturing much less causing a riot. "I was just there to worship" he says.

Second, he deals with the accusation that he's ringleader of a sect called the Nazarenes. **"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"** (vv.14-16). Paul says, "They call it a sect; I call it the Way." And he goes on to state that the Way is not a sect but just a part of faithful Judaism. He says, "We serve the same God of our fathers. We adhere to all that is written in the Old Testament law and prophets. We have the same hope in the resurrection of the dead that they do." Notice he mentions the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. Maybe that sounds strange to you. Maybe you thought just the righteous would be resurrected. But both will be resurrected, and both will have eternal life, but they won't have eternal life in the same place.

Third, he answers the charge that he tried to desecrate the temple. Look at vv.17-19. **"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."** He says, "Desecrate the temple? I'd never do that. I was in Jerusalem on a mission of mercy. I came with a generous offering for those of my nation in need. When they found me in the temple I wasn't breaking any laws. I was ceremonially clean. And where are my accusers? Where are the guys who were there?"

By the way, if you're Jewish or if you have a Jewish background this ought to be of interest to you. Notice that you really don't have to stop being a Jew to be a Christian.

Paul didn't! Paul would see himself as a Jew through and through to the end. He was just a fulfilled Jew, believing that Messiah had come. I believe he would say he was more Jewish than the accusers who stood before him!

I love what he says in v.16. He says **"I believe in the resurrection. I know we'll all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. So I do my best to maintain a blameless conscience before God and men."** He knows he'll answer to God. He's much more concerned about being accused before God than Felix. I have a feeling that Felix was impressed by that as much as Ben Franklin was impressed by Whitefield.

We've seen the nauseating flattery of Tertullus and the blameless conscience of Paul. Now let's turn our attention to Felix.

III. Felix: A Dangerous Delay (vv.22-27).

Maybe it would help to know a bit about Felix. We know something about him from secular history. Felix was a successor to Pontius Pilate. He'd been governor of the province of Judea for five years by this time. He was born a slave, but his brother, Pallas, became a favorite of the emperor Nero. Through the influence of Pallas, Felix was freed from slavery and appointed governor of this province. He was the first slave to ever hold such a position, but he never really outgrew his origins. Tacitus, the Roman historian, says, "He exercised the prerogatives of a king with the spirit of a slave." Felix was power hungry. He was known to hire thugs to eliminate even friends who got in the way of his ambitions. He was also morally corrupt. He'd been married by this time to three different women. The first one we know nothing about. His second wife was the granddaughter of Cleopatra. The third wife appears with him in this account. Her name was Drusilla. She was Jewish, the daughter of Herod Agrippa, the king who had killed the Apostle James. She was just a teenager but she was known throughout the empire as a stunning beauty. She'd been the wife of another man, but Felix had seduced her by means of a magician and now she was living with him as his wife.

This is who Paul stands before. What did Felix do with Paul? He did what so many powerful men have done caught in similar situations. He stalled. He delayed. Look at vv.22-23. **"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."** Felix knew something about the Way, probably from his wife. I believe he knew Paul was innocent; he didn't need to see Lysias; he already had a letter from him saying Paul was innocent. He knew this was just a theological dispute, not one that should involve a court of law. But he also needed to be careful not to inflame the Jews. His job depended on keeping the peace. So he makes a political non-decision.

But the real tragedy of his life was that he also made a spiritual non-decision. Look what happens. **"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" (vv.24-27).

Don't you just love Paul? Talk about a refusal to play the political game. If he played his cards right, he could have used this growing friendship with Felix and his wife to his own advantage. But instead he goes right for the jugular. What did he speak about? He speaks about "faith in Christ Jesus." He explains the gospel to them. He explains that the only way someone can possibly have a blameless conscience before God is through faith in Christ. He bore our sins on the cross. God raised him from the dead as proof that his death secured the salvation of all those who trust in him.

But that's not all he talked about. As the meetings continued he began to see that Felix and Drusilla needed to understand exactly why they needed such a Savior. So he discussed with them "**righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come.**" Now Paul is getting personal. Righteousness? Felix and Drusilla knew they were anything but righteous. You do what you have to do. You don't win at this game by always playing by the rules. Then there was this topic Paul kept bringing up about self-control. I could just hear Felix: "Well, have you seen Drusilla? Have you seen how she turns heads. Come on, Paul, you're a man. If you had a chance at something like that, self-control is not exactly the first thing that comes to mind." And then to top it off he spoke to them about the judgment to come. He might have said, "You know Felix and Drusilla, you now sit in the seat of judgment, but a day will come when you'll appear before the judge of all mankind. Just as I have had to give an account before you so you'll have to give an account before him. Are you prepared for that?"

It's quite a thought, isn't it? There IS a judgment to come. Imagine if we had a video camera which could record thoughts. Suppose that camera was on you all morning and all the thoughts you've had running through your mind were recorded on videotape. And what if I announced that next Sunday we'd play this back on a screen up here? I'll bet we'd have plenty of empty seats! But that's exactly what God is talking about—a time when nothing is hidden, not even our thoughts. Then the question will be: "In the face of God's demand for righteousness, what did you do with Jesus and his offer of forgiveness and salvation?"

This is what Paul talked about. Again, don't you just love Paul? What I can't get over is that he's more concerned with securing Felix and Drusilla's freedom from sin than he is with his own freedom from prison. He said to himself, "Forget about playing your cards right, Paul. You have an opportunity here. These people are willing to listen. Their souls are at stake." Besides that, Paul knew that he too would soon stand before the judge and give an account. So he threw caution to the wind. He spoke the truth in love. There comes those moments in each one of our lives as followers of

Jesus when we have to decide if we're going to simply focus on playing our cards right and saving our skin or if we're going to tell the truth and risk losing it all. Someone said of John Knox at his funeral after he took on Mary Queen of Scots, "Here lies one who neither flattered nor feared any flesh." May it be said of us!

But I also want you to see this from the standpoint of what God might have been doing in Felix and Drusilla's life. From the standpoint of God and eternity, this was the opportunity of a lifetime! Look what they had. They had knowledge. They already knew something about the Way, but here they have an opportunity to hear the truth of the gospel straight from the lips of the apostle. At the judgment to come they couldn't say, "Well, no one ever really told us." They also had some real interest. Yes, there was a bit of greed attached to that. Felix was hoping for a bribe, but there's still a genuine attraction to the truth. There was something about it that drew them. They also had a sense of conviction. It says, "**Felix became frightened.**" He heard about these things and he realized that he was indeed one who had lived his life in rebellion against God. He knew this. He sensed that he would one day have to give an account. These are all indications that God was working in their lives. The Spirit of God was wooing them. Jesus said of the Holy Spirit that he'll "convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment." That's what's happening in the lives of Felix and Drusilla.

But what did they do? How did they respond? "**Go away for the present and when I find time I will summon you.**" He delayed. He procrastinated on the most important decision in life. He made a decision to put it off and that decision would turn around and make him.

I wonder how many people do the same thing today? How many Felix's and Drusilla's come to church several times a year? And once in a while they like to hear Dr. Graham on the TV. He's so handsome and so compelling! Yet when they're brought to that place of decision, the place of commitment, they say, "Not now. Maybe another day." They make a decision to put it off and soon that decision turns around and makes them.

Maybe you were raised in a Christian home by godly parents who brought you to church. Maybe God put a Christian friend in your life who like Paul was faithful to tell you the hard truth. Maybe deep down you know you've done wrong; you know you haven't lived by God's standards. You've wondered what will happen if you have to stand before a holy God at judgment. You have this inclination to do something about it but up until now you've just said, "Not now. Maybe later. I need to think more about it."

Augustine put off the Lord for a long time after being raised by a godly mother. She prayed for him daily. He later wrote, "I could give no reply except a lazy and drowsy, 'Yes, Lord, yes, I'll get around to it right away. Just don't bother me for a little while. But "right away" didn't happen right away; "a little while" turned out to be a very long while.'"

The question is, what happens while you wait? Does the accumulation of sin day by day, week by week and year by year make you more open to Christ or less? The fact is each time you put off making a decision that decision

makes you. The next time it will be easier to say no and one more excuse will be added to your list. Your heart will grow spiritual calluses that will lessen your sensitivity to the things of Christ. That's why the Bible says, "**Behold, now is the acceptable time...now is the day of salvation**" (2 Cor. 6:2).

CONCLUSION

In 1888 Dwight L. Moody came to Los Angeles to preach the gospel. Harry Ironside was only twelve years old when he went to hear him. Although it was not until two years later that he came to Christ the Lord was working on him. There were 8,000 people packed into Hazzard's Pavilion. Ironside never forgot that night. After the solo, Moody rose to his feet and began to plead for people to turn their lives over to Christ. At first no one responded, then he said abruptly, "Will every truly converted person in this building rise to your feet?" About 5,000 instantly arose. And then he asked, "Will all who were converted before you were 15 years old sit down?" Over half took their seats. "Now all who came to Christ before you were 20 please be seated." About half of those remaining obeyed him. Then he went on in the same way, "All below 30 — 40 — 50." By that time just a handful were still standing. When he got to 60 only 3 out of that 8,000 stood. When he got to 70 no one stood.

His point was clear. The longer you wait, the harder it becomes. You make a decision to put it off and that decision turns around and makes you. It was true of Ben Franklin. It was true of Felix. And when they died they both appeared before the One who won't postpone judgments and who does not accept bribes. One day we'll all stand before that great Judge and give an account of our lives. How will you stand in that day? Put your trust in Christ now. The decision you make today will turn around and make you.