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## NO TIME FOR GOD

Acts 24:24-27

By

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Acts Lesson 63

## No Time for God Acts 24:24-27

A legend tells of the devil summoning his evil forces to consider how best to keep the world on his side. One demon said, "Send me. I will tell them that there is no God." Satan replied, "They will never believe you. Most of them know that there is a God." Another said, "Send me. I'll tell them that there is no heaven or hell." Satan shook his head, "That will never do. They know that there is life after death." Then a third spoke, "Send me. I'll tell them there is a God, a heaven, and a hell, but there's no hurry to decide." "Ah," said Satan with satisfaction, "that is the best plan!" He was sent out into the world to spread this lie (source unknown).

That demon was surely at work in the case of Felix. Here was a man with the opportunity of a lifetime, to listen to none other than the apostle Paul preach the gospel to him and his wife personally. But Paul's preaching went to meddling and got a bit too close for comfort. Felix should have responded as the trembling Philipian jailer did, by asking, "What must I do to be saved?" Instead, Felix became frightened and told Paul, "Go away for the present, and when I find time, I will summon you" (24:25). He did summon Paul often after that, but he never trembled again. He missed the opportunity to be saved because of the excuse that he didn't have time for God.

Each of us needs to ponder Felix's excuse, "when I find time." We all live busy lives. Many things crowd into our daily schedules. We all know that we should make time for God, but we're prone to think, "I'll do that later, when I find the time. Right now, I've got too heavy of a schedule." "As soon as the semester is over, I'll find time for God." "As soon as I get through the current pressured time at work, I'll make time for God." "As soon as the kids get into school, I'll make time for God." "When I'm older, after I've had some fun in life, then I'll make time for God." And so life slips by, the things of God fade from view, and we miss our opportunity, just as Felix did.

Felix and his wife Drusilla were colorful characters whose lives sound like a modern TV series. He was a slave in the household of Antonia, the daughter of Mark Antony and Octavia and the mother of the Roman emperor Claudius. Felix and his brother, Pallas, were given their freedom and rose to positions of great influence during Claudius' reign. Pallas became the chief accountant to the public treasury and amassed enormous wealth. Through his connections in high places, Felix got appointed as governor of Judea, a position that he held probably from A.D. 52-59.

In his personal life, from a worldly point of view, Felix had not done badly for a slave. His first wife was the granddaughter of Antony and Cleopatra. Drusilla was his third wife, a famous beauty whom he seduced from her husband, a king in Syria. She was about 18 or 19 when Paul spoke to them here. She was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, who executed James and planned to do the same to Peter (Acts 12). She was the sister of Agrippa II and Bernice (Acts 25:13 ff.), who were rumored to be living together in incest. Bernice later became the lover of the Roman general Titus, who destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Drusilla and Felix had a son who was killed in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. You can see why I said that their story sounds like a modern soap opera!

This vignette of Paul's encounter with Felix and Drusilla gives us some principles that will enable us to find time for God:

To find time for God, we must seize present opportunities, deal with known sin, and establish proper priorities.

Each of these principles is illustrated positively in Paul and negatively in Felix and Drusilla.

1. To find time for God, we must seize present opportunities.

I once saw a cartoon that showed Martin Luther sitting in front of a TV set with the remote in his hand. He's thinking, "Should I write those 95 theses? Nah, let's see what's on the tube." The caption said, "What would have happened if Luther had had TV." All too often, we allow procrastination to rob us of spiritual opportunities, whether for our own growth or for the advance of the gospel. Note the contrast between Paul and Felix.

- A. Paul seized present opportunities for spiritual advance.

Here is Paul, a prisoner who is innocent of the false charges against him, coming before the man who had the power to release him or execute him. Paul easily could have been tempted to argue for his release, but to say very little about the Christian faith. But Paul acted according to his stated purpose, of doing all things for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:23). Even in presenting the gospel, he could have been tempted to go very lightly, being sure not to say anything offensive to this powerful man and his wife. Maybe he should present the gospel in a user-friendly fashion, showing them how Jesus could help them have a happier life. He could bring out his best stories to warm their hearts and maybe Felix would even let Paul out of prison.

But Paul didn't know anything about a user-friendly gospel! He didn't give Felix and Drusilla an inspiring message that left them feeling good about themselves. He went for the jugular! He spoke about the faith that is in Christ Jesus (24:24, lit.). And he didn't just say to them, "Don't worry about your sins. Just believe in Jesus and you'll have eternal life." Look at what he spoke about as he explained the Christian faith: "righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come" (24:25). The verb translated "discussing" means "to reason with." Paul didn't bypass their minds and go for heartwarming stories. He appealed through their minds to their consciences. The gospel should make people think, convicting their consciences, leading to a rational decision to trust in Christ. An emotional appeal that bypasses the mind may get decisions, but they will be flimsy, at best.

Where did Paul come up with these topics for a message to this unbelieving couple? Did he need some instruction on how to present the gospel more sensitively? No, he was doing what Jesus said the Holy Spirit would do through His followers: He would convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Paul couldn't have aimed this message any more directly at his hearers than he did! They might have expected a safe, interesting, comfortable lecture on the Christian religion. But Paul went for their consciences, bringing the message pointedly to bear on their corrupt, immoral, worldly lifestyles.

When he spoke of *righteousness*, Paul probably spoke on the perfect righteousness of God and the absolute righteousness that

God demands from every person as revealed in His holy law. Everyone has sinned and falls short of God's perfect standard. Paul's words on the need for *self-control* hit this couple with their own sins of lust, adultery, greed, and selfish indulgence. Perhaps he said to them, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present world" (Titus 2:11-12). *The judgment to come* pointed them to the fact that God "has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

We don't know how far Paul got, but you can be assured that if he was allowed to keep going, he spoke on the need for faith in Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection provide the payment for the penalty of sins that every sinner needs. Paul saw the opening for the gospel, and he went through it with full force.

But perhaps before Paul was able to point to the Lord Jesus, Felix became visibly frightened over Paul's message and said, "Go away for the present, and when I find time, I will summon you." Here we see that ...

B. Felix disregarded present opportunities for spiritual advance.

"When I find time"—what a sad excuse! Here Felix was, talking with none other than the apostle Paul, who could have answered any spiritual question that Felix had asked. His fear would seem to indicate that the Holy Spirit was bringing conviction of sin to his conscience as he felt the force of Paul's words. Yet he sent Paul away with a lame excuse about finding time later. He often did talk with Paul after this, but he never trembled with fear after this. He missed his opportunity to respond to the gospel.

When your body is in pain, it's a warning that something is wrong. If you dull the pain with drugs without fixing the root problem, you may be in for more serious trouble later. It's like the warning lights on the dashboard of your car. When they go off, you need to find out what the problem is and fix it. Continuing to ignore the warnings can destroy your engine.

It is the same way spiritually. God may use His Word, the preaching of the Word, or someone's godly words or behavior to prick your conscience. You can pay attention to the warnings and take appropriate action, or you can ignore the warnings by making up excuses and pretending that the problems don't exist. Felix should have allowed his fear to drive him to ask, "What must I do to be saved?" Instead, he blocked out the warning and missed his opportunity for salvation.

Every week, we all face opportunities for spiritual advance. There is the opportunity to set your alarm a few minutes early to get up and spend time with the Lord. Or, you can sack in and miss that opportunity. There is the opportunity to read some spiritually enriching Christian books that will change your life. Or, you can sit mesmerized in front of TV shows that pollute your mind with filthy humor, which the Bible plainly commands us to avoid (Eph. 5:3). There is the opportunity to get your finances in order as a good steward of what the Lord has entrusted to you, and to give generously to His cause. Or, you can squander those resources on American junk. There is the opportunity to meet with other believers to grow in your faith. Or, you can forsake assembling together with the saints. There is the opportunity to talk to a lost person about the Savior. Or, you can busy yourself with less important things. With Paul, will you seize present opportunities for spiritual advance or, with Felix, will you make up excuses and miss those opportunities?

2. To find time for God, we must deal with known sin.

It is often difficult and painful to root sin out of our lives. But if we ignore sin, it doesn't just quietly go away. It grows like cancer, until it finally destroys us. Note again the contrast between Paul and Felix.

A. Paul dealt with sin in his life.

As Paul testified, "I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience before God and before men" (24:16). Part of maintaining a blameless conscience is to confess and turn from our sin as soon as the Holy Spirit convicts us of it.

In the current situation, Paul easily could have rationalized a little bribe to get himself out of prison. Just think of what he could

accomplish if he were free! He could preach at Rome and go on to evangelize Spain. All he had to do was to say the word and his friends could be there shortly with a bribe for Felix. Prayer for Paul's release didn't seem to be working. Besides, the system worked through bribes. Since it was for the furthering of the gospel, why not go with the flow? But Paul would not use corrupt means, even to achieve a noble cause. He was a man of integrity, who did his best always to maintain a clear conscience.

This point is connected to the first. If you don't deal with your sin and maintain a clear conscience, you won't be able to see and seize the spiritual opportunities that God puts in front of you. Your spiritual callousness will dull your conscience or your guilt will hinder you from responding. To find time for God, you must deal with any known sins in your life.

#### B. Felix refused to deal with his sin.

Felix apparently knew a lot about Christianity (24:22), but he liked to keep things in the realm of safe intellectual discussions. Perhaps he called for Paul so that as a governor, he would be more knowledgeable about this rapidly growing new religion. He could impress his colleagues with his understanding.

But when Paul started getting personal, talking about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment, the discussion suddenly got too close for comfort. For Felix to repent of his sin, he would have had to turn his back on his entire way of life. Felix had been living to accumulate all of the money and possessions that he could get. He was keeping Paul in prison with the hope that Paul's wealthy friends would come up with a bribe to set him free. But Paul was saying that the Christian faith meant seeking God's righteousness, not this world's riches. Felix had been giving in to every sensual whim and pleasure. But Paul was saying that he needed self-control. Felix had been living as if this life were all there is. But Paul was saying that there is a judgment and eternity to come. Felix refused to deal with his sin, and missed the opportunity to receive eternal life.

I know that the thought of dealing with your sin is threatening. But which is more threatening: to deal with your sin now, through repentance and confession, and receive God's mercy? Or,

to have to face your sin at the judgment, and receive eternal punishment? If you bring your sin to the Lord now, in repentance, He is rich in mercy and abounding in love. Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). He promised, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). Come to Jesus in repentance and He will welcome you!

To find time for God, we must seize present opportunities and we must deal with known sin. Finally,

3. To find time for God we must establish proper priorities.

Again, note the contrast between Paul and Felix:

- A. Paul had established proper priorities.

Paul's priorities shine through here and everywhere else that you see him in action. His life was committed to the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel. Everything that Paul did was with a view to furthering the kingdom and glory of Jesus Christ. As he told the Ephesian elders, "I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (20:24). He told the Philippians (1:20-21) that in his imprisonment, his aim was that "Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

As I have already mentioned, it would have been tempting for Paul to set aside the gospel and focus on his release. After all, if he could get out of prison, many more could hear the gospel. Why risk offending this powerful couple with the gospel? Why not at least give them a more pleasant version of things? Why focus on righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come? The answer is, because Paul's priority was, as ours should be, to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Paul's straightforward presentation of the gospel and his refusal to bribe Felix resulted in his staying in prison for the next two years. God didn't reward Paul's faithfulness with a quick release. But Paul would not compromise his priority of testifying to the gospel of Jesus Christ, both by his words and by his life. He lived in light of the coming judgment, and he trusted that God would

deliver him from prison if and when it was God's will to do so. Otherwise, what were a few years in prison in comparison to eternity with Christ?

Do you live every day in light of standing before the Lord in all His glory and hearing, "Well done, good and faithful slave" (Matt. 25:21)? Your number one ambition should be "to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:9b-10). How awful it would be to hear on that day, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23)!

B. Felix had established wrong priorities.

Felix was a rags to riches, Horatio Alger, all-American success story! He went from slave to governor; from being a piece of property with no rights, to owning much property; from being powerless to powerful. He had friends in the highest places of the Roman Empire. He had a string of beautiful princesses as his wives. Isn't that what every person should aim for? If you buy into the American dream, yes! But if you live for Jesus Christ, no!

Felix was successful in the world's eyes, but from God's perspective, he was a man whose god was self. His only standard was his own advancement and pleasure. If the Jews rebelled, crucify the rebels! If people got in his way up the ladder, push them off! If a married woman looked sexier than his current wife, dump his wife and seduce the other wife from her husband. If a prisoner would give him a bribe, his release could be arranged. Otherwise, let him stay in jail, especially since it pleased the political constituents. After all, one's political career is more important than a prisoner's life!

I trust that no one here is as ruthless as Felix was. But I fear that there are many American Christians that have gotten caught up in the pursuit of the American dream. They profess to be Christians, but other than attending church and living a relatively moral life, they're not much different from the world in their goals. They're living the good life, accumulating all that they can, and dreaming about the day when they can retire and live totally for themselves! They give no thought to advancing God's kingdom.

Many American Christians spend their time just as the world spends its time. Polls reveal that American evangelical Christians watch the same amount of TV and the same programs as the population at large! After sleep and work, the thing that Americans do the most is watch TV! If you watch just two hours per day (the national average is much higher), in 70 years you will have spent almost six years, day and night, watching TV! Can you imagine hitting 75, looking back on your life and thinking, "What have I accomplished with my life? I've spent six years watching television!"

### Conclusion

In one of his plays, Shakespeare describes a dying man calling on God. He makes the narrator say, "I, to comfort him, bid him he should not think of God. I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet" (in Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], Acts 13-End, p. 293). That is the way the world thinks: Don't trouble yourself with God until you're at death's door. But God's way is very different: "Behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation'" (2 Cor. 6:2).

This very day, God is giving you a great spiritual opportunity through the fact that you're hearing His Word. It may be to trust in Christ for salvation. It may be to deal with some sin in your life. It may be to get your priorities in line. Don't be like Felix and miss it! Be like Paul and seize the day for God's glory!

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the proper balance between grace and salt (Col. 4:6) in witnessing? How "salty" should we be?
2. Can Christians pursue the kingdom of God and the American Dream at the same time? Why/why not (biblically)?
3. How can a procrastinator overcome his problem?
4. Do you have written spiritual goals for your life? If not, write a life purpose statement and some goals to help you move in the right direction.
5. Felix's activities, ambitions, and anxieties reveal his priorities. What priorities do your activities, ambitions, and anxieties reveal?

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