

## PLEASE DON'T SHOOT!

Acts 24:22-27

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On February 19, two Highway Patrol officers in Spearfish, South Dakota, arrested a 17-year-old boy and charged him with stealing a car in his nearby hometown of Madison, South Dakota. According to the police report in the local newspaper, *The Madison Daily Leader*, the troopers had been casually finishing up a meal at a local restaurant when this boy from an adjacent booth walked up, spread-eagled himself on the floor, and shouted, "Please don't shoot me!" He then followed with the admission, "The car is in the parking lot!"

A healthy conscience is a wonderful gift. When our conscience is healthy and doing its job, we don't need to get caught in order to come to the point where we admit we have done wrong and need to change the way we think about our lives and the lives of others. We only need to feel the weight of our sin, our wrongdoing, our rebellion against God and then respond appropriately.

The New Testament Greek word translated "**conscience**" comes from a root word that means "to see." Long before its use in the New Testament, this word had the idea of looking back on one's past and evaluating it. "Over time, the meaning of 'conscience' developed into the notion of an innate moral sense that approves or disapproves of one's personal actions and thoughts." (p. 59, *So That's What it Means*, Don Campbell, Wendell Johnston, John Walvoord and John Witmer. Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Thomas Nelson, Inc. 2004) Hence, your conscience is something that gives you a basic sense of moral insight.

According to the Bible (**2 Corinthians 4:2**), all human beings are born with a God-given moral conscience. It matters not whether you are a Christian in the US in July of 2015, a Roman slave, or a Jewish adulteress living in the Middle East in the first century.

When we disregard our consciences, we immediately feel guilt or shame. If we don't respond and do what is right according to our conscience, the Bible says that we can "**sear**" (**1 Timothy 4:2**) or "**corrupt**" (**Titus 1:15**) our consciences, making them no longer reliable or sensitive to when we or others are doing wrong. Seared or deadened consciences are what allow a society or government to drift away from

God and lead to its downfall (**Romans 1:18-32**). This was the case with Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and more recently, with our own Supreme Court ruling concerning gay marriage.

This morning as we look at our passage of Scripture, we will observe three individuals who demonstrated that their consciences were actively at work. And yet, not all of them responded appropriately to find peace at the moment or eternal life in the long run. Why? What is necessary for one to have a healthy conscience that will respond appropriately to God's call to the heart? That's the direction our study of God's Word will be taking us this morning.

Before we read our passage, it would be helpful to know a little bit more about the two historical people mentioned, Antonios Felix, the governor of Judea, and his wife Drusilla.

Felix and Drusilla were colorful characters whose lives remind me of a modern TV soap opera. Before holding his position as the governor of Judea, Felix was a slave in the household of Antonia, 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 as a result amassed enormous wealth. Through his connections in high places, he got his brother appointed as governor of Judea, a position that he held from AD 52-59. The high office of governorship granted Felix was something almost unheard of for a former slave. His appointment was frowned upon by some Romans.

Felix's governmental administration was marked by many brutally suppressed insurrections of the Jews that demonstrated Felix's total lack of understanding or sympathy for them. Felix's administrative ineptitude was bound to catch up with him sooner or later, and it did. Two years after our present scene, Felix was finally removed from office for his total mismanagement of a dispute between the Jews and gentiles of Caesarea.

In his personal life, from a strictly worldly point of view, Felix had not done badly for a slave. He was married three times, all of whom were princesses. The first one we know nothing about. His second wife was the granddaughter of Antony and Cleopatra.

His third wife is the one we read about in our text this morning, Drusilla. The Roman historiographer Suetonius relates that Drusilla was born in Rome and

brought to Caesarea by her father, King Herod Agrippa I, where she spent her childhood. Drusilla was a Jewess. At six years of age, she was promised in marriage to Epiphanes, the son of King Antiochus. But Epiphanes refused to submit to the Jewish rite of circumcision, and so the marriage was never consummated.

By the age of fourteen, Drusilla had become famous for her beauty. Her father was dead, and her brother, King Agrippa II, who comes up in the next chapter of **Acts**, gave her in marriage to Azizus, king of Emesa in northern Syria. Because that husband was impotent, Felix, with an eye for beautiful women, found it easy to seduce her with promises of a happier life with himself as governor of Judea. At the time of our passage, Drusilla was about eighteen or nineteen years of age. Eventually, she and Felix had a son who was killed in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. You can see why I said that their story sounds like a modern soap opera!

Now, let's turn to our text. Our passage for this morning begins, in **Acts 24:22**. Previously, the text shows us to be in a trial in Caesarea, Israel. Felix is presiding over the trial of the Apostle Paul. In the room with the Apostle Paul was Luke, who as an eye witness records what takes place, presumably at least a few other Roman soldiers to make sure things stayed under control, Paul's accusers, forty members of the Sanhedrin, and their spokesperson Tertullus. Tertullus presented to Governor Felix four accusations against Paul, hoping that Felix would release Paul to the Jews for execution. But Paul, in his ensuing defense, quickly defanged each of the four accusations made against him. When he was finished, in **verse 21**, Felix as a just governor should have immediately released Paul and sent the Jews on their way. However, that is not what happened.

We pick up the action beginning with **verse 22**:

**<sup>22</sup>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." <sup>23</sup>Then he gave orders to the centurion for him [Paul] to be kept in custody and yet have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him. <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>But as he [Paul] 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.” <sup>26</sup>At the same time too, he [Felix] was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him [Paul] quite often and converse with him. <sup>27</sup>But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.**

In verses 22-23, Felix puts off his decision as to what he should do with Paul. His statement about seeking out Lysias for more information confirms the interpretation that it was Lysias, not Paul, that Tertullus had in mind when he challenged Felix in verse 8 to examine him to see whether or not what Tertullus said was the truth. There is no indication that Lysias ever came to Caesarea or that Felix even sent for him or that they ever met. However, like Lysias before him, Felix must have realized that Paul was guilty of no crime by Roman law. Still Felix, as their ruler, didn't want to unnecessarily incur any more of the Jews' wrath. He was having enough trouble keeping Jews all over Palestine under control as it was. It was easier to put off the whole matter, even if it meant that Paul would be jailed for it.

At the same time, he did not want to restrict Paul's rights as a legitimate Roman citizen. So, Felix instructed an officer to guard Paul but to allow him a measure of freedom, as if he were living in his own home. He was placed under house arrest, or more accurately, palace arrest! Felix allowed Paul's friends to bring him food, drink, and other commodities to make his life comfortable. The friends who visited Paul were probably members of the church in Caesarea that we read about back in 21:8-14.

After a few days the governor sent for him. As I read Luke's description in the next verses, I sense one can see the Spirit of God working on Felix and Drusilla's guilty consciences.

By marrying Felix, the Jewess Drusilla defied the Old Testament law that forbade her to become the spouse of a non-Jew. Yet being a lawbreaker, she still was sufficiently interested in listening to Paul preach about her Messiah, Jesus Christ, and the good news of how a sinner could be saved.

Paul's presentation of truth was not delivered in some abstract theological lecture set for a classroom. The verb describing Paul's approach in **verse 25** "**was discussing**" means "to reason with." Paul was trying to speak to their heads and hearts so that they would make a decision to turn to Jesus as their only hope for forgiveness of their sins, the ongoing positive remake or transformation of their lives, and ultimately the confidence of knowing that they would spend eternity in heaven with God.

Paul did not beat around the bush. He was sensitive, not too harsh, but spoke the truth in love. Luke mentions three sequential logical points that Paul laid out before this husband and wife. First, Paul spoke of righteousness, the knowing of right from wrong and living a virtuous life. I wouldn't be surprised if Paul had even touched upon some specific convicting areas of Felix's life, like his cruel and overly-oppressive, heavy-handed ruling of all the inhabitants in Palestine, not just the Jews.

Then, Paul spoke to both Felix and Drusilla about "**self-control**" or more likely their lack of it as revealed by the unbridled lust that had drawn them together. One gets the feeling that Felix and Drusilla were probably becoming uneasy with Paul's explanation. In the mirror of Paul's explicit teaching, the governor and his spouse saw their plight and were convicted.

But then Paul added his third point--that they each must eventually face the divine Judge to receive His verdict for how they each had lived their lives and what lay ahead of them as their eternal destiny unless they trusted Jesus. It was at this point that our text says Felix "**became frightened.**" These words translated literally mean, "**became terrified.**"

Keep in mind, Roman leaders prided themselves in their ability to be stoical and restrain their emotions under all circumstances. But with the conviction of the Spirit of God coming down on Felix's and Drusilla's consciences, having been

exposed for who they really were deep down, Felix's heart was so gripped with fear that he could not hide it. Luke records what was visibly seen in Felix's change in countenance.

Paul had accurately diagnosed the case and offered the remedy. Having their consciences sufficiently stirred, and having been given their options, it was now up to them to choose what each would do with the Gospel. Felix became visibly frightened over Paul's message, and the text tells us his response. Felix ordered, **“Go away for the present, and when I find time, I will summon you.”**

**Verse 26** does not make it clear whether just Felix met several times with Paul after this, or if Drusilla also joined him as he continued to listen to Paul's explanation of the personal significance of knowing Jesus Christ.

But what is clear is that Felix's battle with righteousness was on more than one front. We see at least three areas of Felix's moral failure revealed in this text: his wrongful, cruel oppression of people, his lust, and his greed.

In **verse 26**, Luke informs us that Governor Felix was just another hack politician on the take. He kept Paul in jail because he hoped to receive a bribe from his prisoner. The practice of keeping prisoners in jail until they paid a bribe, although forbidden by Roman law, was common among rulers serving such a long distance from Rome.

It's very possible that because Felix had heard Paul speaking of bringing alms to the poor, that he surmised that Paul was either a man of means and or a man of influence who could extract money from others. Therefore, Felix's greedy mind immediately conceived a plan to exact a price for Paul's release. Maybe Felix was convinced by the numerous friends who came to visit Paul and provide for his daily needs that they could help in paying a bribe for Paul's release. Who knows? But it is clear from the text that part of Paul's wrongful imprisonment came as a result of this man's greed.

I believe there is an observation that can be fairly drawn from this text. Luke writes that Felix would frequently call for Paul to have a chat with him. This information indicates that the relationship between Felix and Paul was amicable. Paul would continue to meet with Felix as often as Felix would want, with the hope of leading him to Christ.

Yet, in my own experience and as we see here, I have discovered down through the years that after spending many amicable visits, dinners, and other social occasions with men and women stuck in their sin, often times it did not result in any significant action on their parts to change their minds either about trusting Christ or about obeying God by turning away from their sinful practices. There is nothing in this text or in extra-Biblical history that hints that either Drusilla or Felix came to Christ.

In all of this, I sense a warning for all readers of this text as it concerns dealing with the conviction of one's conscience about ungodly living once one has been confronted by God's truth. Jesus told his disciples that one day the Holy Spirit would come in a fashion that would be unique to this world--in a fashion never known before. He stated in **John 16:8-10**:

**When He [the Holy Spirit] comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.**

The Holy Spirit will convict the world, all people, of their sin, both those who will become followers of Jesus and those who will reject Jesus. All will feel the prick of their conscience that they are doing wrong and need a savior.

That being said, we see the evidence of God's convicting Felix of his unrighteousness and pending judgment should he not change his mind about Jesus and trust Him to be his Savior. Knowing these things, how could Felix not turn to Christ? The answer is that the longer he delayed in doing so, the more numb his conscience became to the needle prick of truth administered by the Great Physician. Here is this truth in the form of a warning: To delay turning away from sin when one's conscience has been pricked dulls the edge of the sword of the Spirit. Each time we say, "Tomorrow, Lord," the Holy Spirit's pricking and prodding of our conscience becomes less effective. Eventually, we give little more than a lethargic yawn in response to God's truth. When that happens, a procrastinatory callous forms over our hearts, and although the Spirit stabs us with conviction, we may not feel a thing.

We will explore this warning more in a moment. For now, I want you to simply put this on the back burner of your mind for a few minutes. Let's continue with closing our study of the text.

In **verse 27**, Luke tells us that Felix's tenure as governor of Judea had come to end. He was removed from office. Luke simply states that he was "**succeeded by Porcius Festus.**" In order to find out what really happened to Felix, we need to look outside of the Bible. When we do, we learn that after two years, Emperor Nero recalled Felix to Rome. The recall was prompted by political conditions in Palestine. Felix had intervened militarily when Jewish and Greek inhabitants of Caesarea started throwing rocks at each other in a dispute over who had the dominant civil right to be the governing authorities, under Rome, in their own backyard. The Jews felt they did because of their greater numbers and wealth, and because Herod the Great, a Jew, had built the city of Caesarea. On the other hand, the Greeks felt that they possessed the right to self-rule under Rome, because they had the support of the Roman military, and because they claimed the city was always meant to be a gentile city. Using the Greek soldiers under his command, Felix intervened and took what would later be determined as a military retaliation upon the Jews. Felix's soldiers killed a number of Jews, imprisoned others, and looted the houses in which Jews had hoarded substantial sums of money.

Not standing for that, a delegation of Jews from Caesarea went to Rome to complain. Having heard their complaint, Nero immediately had Felix recalled to Rome. In his place, Nero sent Porcius Festus to succeed him.

Luke tells us that Felix, realizing that he was in serious trouble, "**Wanted to do the Jews a favor, so he left Paul in prison.**" The word Luke uses for "**favor**" conveys the meaning *quid pro quo* (something for something). Felix knew that when he got to Rome he would be questioned about his actions in Caesarea. If all did not go well, he could not only lose his position, but he could be imprisoned or executed. Hence, Felix wanted to gain the support of at least some Jews. The only Jews he could turn to were those living in Jerusalem. Hence, in order to gain the favor of the Jewish Sanhedrin, he kept Paul imprisoned in Caesarea to counteract the accusations made by the Jews in Caesarea. Fortunately for Felix, his well-to-do brother Pallas pleaded for him in the presence of Nero and had Felix exonerated.

The amount of time this chapter covered, from the trial and Paul's initial meetings with Felix and Drusilla was relatively short. **24:2-23** took all of maybe ten to fifteen minutes before Felix sent them all away. But something stuck in Felix's

craw from those few minutes that led Felix to invite Paul to meet with him and Drusilla. From Luke's record, their follow-up meetings had nothing to do with Paul's actual case. Rather, those meetings had to do with a more personal matter, one's faith.

What was it about Paul or what he said that got to Felix so that he would seek out Paul? I believe it was Paul's statement to Felix in **verse 16**. **"In view of this I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men."** Because Paul, a believer in Jesus who still battled sin in his life, had a blameless conscience, I believe he enjoyed the deep restful sleep that comes for one who has lived a life of integrity with a pure conscience, knowing he has been forgiven, accepted, and loved by God.

But those who are in leadership and are lustful for power, position, and possessions can't say they live with a blameless conscience. Most often, they are not men or women of integrity. Regardless of how seared their conscience may be, the fruit of wickedness is not peace, patience, the ability to sleep deep and long at night, or the enjoyment of close fellowship with trusting friends. After the life he had lived, I sense he wanted what Paul had. Felix must have longed to discover relief from the sins of deceit, treachery, and betrayal that diseased both his political and private life.

When we read what we do about Paul's blameless conscience, both Felix and Drusilla stand in stark contrast to him. And when Paul begins to explain the gospel to them in private, their consciences were screaming, "Guilty!"

The concept of maintaining a good conscience is an important one in Scripture. Paul later tells Timothy, **"But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith"** (1 Timothy 1:5). Later, Paul tells Timothy to keep faith and a good conscience, warning him that some have rejected these qualities and **"suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith"** (1 Timothy 1:19). Please note that the shipwreck was not the shipwreck of the nonbeliever, but of those of faith! Believers can shipwreck their faith when they don't pay attention to their conscience and the Holy Spirit's convicting work and continue to live in sin.

So, it is crucial for us to understand what it means to maintain a good conscience and to practice it daily. How is it that one can renew and maintain a healthy conscience? I see at least three ingredients necessary to maintaining a healthy and blameless conscience.

Because of the fall of the human race, the conscience by itself is not a safe guide. Jesus told the disciples that the day would come when those who killed them would think that they were offering a service to God (**John 16:2**). His words applied to these Jewish leaders who sought to kill Paul. Paul himself had once thought that he was serving God by persecuting Christians. If we compare ourselves with others rather than with Scripture, we can conclude that what we're doing is okay. But God's Word penetrates like a sword down into our innermost being, "**judging the thoughts and intentions of our hearts**," laying us bare in God's holy presence (**Hebrews 4:12-13**). So we must grow in our understanding of God's standards as revealed in His Word.

So, the first ingredient necessary to renew and maintain a healthy conscience is to regularly confront your mind with the truth of God's Word. This washing your mind with the Word of God will supernaturally liven, renew, and maintain your conscience.

Second, once we know what is right to do, then if we want to maintain a healthy conscience, we need to seek to live before God with a pure heart and not continue in sin.

**Luke 15** is made up of a series of parables aimed at the heart. Each parable reveals an aspect of a truly repentant heart. Jesus said, "**Just so, I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance**" (**Luke 15:7**). In light of the context, I believe these words point to both believers and non-believers who sin. True repentance begins in the mind. It is to have a change of mind so that in the end, the change of mind, the repentant mind, so works on the heart of the inner man that it will manifest itself by a change in behavior. When you feel your conscience pricked, avoid the tendency to rationalize, make excuses, or blame others.

Unfortunately, none of us lives a sinless life, but that does not mean we cannot have a "**blameless conscience**." A blameless conscience is not a conscience that has never sinned. A blameless conscience is one that keeps short accounts with God and others. Having a blameless conscience before God and others means that you quickly confess your sin and turn away from any sin that His Word or His Spirit convicts you of, no matter what others may have done to you. And if necessary, amends must be made to those you have wronged. **I John 1:9** states, "**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**" When we have sought the forgiveness of

God and those we have wronged, regardless of the wrong they may have committed against us, it leads to cleansing and a blameless conscience. Hence, maintaining a healthy conscience requires you to quickly confess and turn away from any sin clearly spelled out in God's Word.

I find it informative that one of the healthy motivations for maintaining a blameless conscience is to have a clear understanding of the reality of eternity, the coming judgment of God, and His promise of the receiving of or loss of eternal rewards. Paul relates this in **Acts 24:15**, just before he mentions having a blameless conscience. He states, **“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 men.”** And then, privately before Felix in **verse 25**, Paul mentioned again the reality of judgment in light of eternity.

If there is no God, no resurrection, no future judgment, and no eternal rewards based on how you faithfully served the Lord this side of heaven, then you are a fool to live as a Christian. Those aren't my words; those are Paul's words (**1 Corinthians 15:19; 2 Corinthians 5:10**). If there is no eternity, then live for all the immediate pleasure that you can get, because you will die soon (**1 Corinthians 15:32**). But if God lives, if He is going to raise every person to stand before Him in judgment, and if he is going to reward those who have faithfully served him, then everyone should repent of his sins, trust in Christ as Savior, and live all of life with a blameless conscience before God and before men.

If you cannot go from here today with such a clear conscience, your greatest and most urgent need is to get right with God!