

I

A few weeks ago, I helped one of my sons prepare for a Social Studies quiz. His class has been studying the Constitution and learning about concepts like the right to due process and the right to trial by a jury.

And as I dropped him off at school on the morning of his quiz, I was reminded of one of my favorite bumper stickers of all time. It said this: "As long as there are tests, there will always be prayer in schools."

II

We of course know that tests don't end just because we finish school. There are seasons of life that are full of tests and trials of all kinds, and I think it's safe to say that as the pandemic resurges, as heartbreaking images continue to come out of Afghanistan, as hurricanes and wildfires threaten lives and livelihoods, people speak to and about one another with outright contempt, it's not too much of a stretch to say that we are living through a season of testing and trials.

Tests and trials, whatever their form, by their very nature are designed to cut to the heart of the matter. By their very nature, tests and trials of all kinds are designed to get at the truth, to show the world something about what we know to be true, to show us and everyone around us what's in our heads, what's in our hearts, and what's in our guts.

And our story from the Book of Acts this morning involves just such a trial.

III

This spring and summer, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Book of Acts, and as we've said all along, Acts can be read as the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. When viewed together, the Gospel of Luke relates the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and Acts relates the birth of the church and the movement of the Holy Spirit as the good news about Jesus spreads from Jerusalem out to the ends of the earth.

We've just about completed our read through Acts, and most of the action in the second half of the book is focused on a man named Paul. Paul, as you may recall, was once the chief persecutor of the church, but after a dramatic experience on the Damascus Road, Paul became the early church's most important missionary and theologian, making several trips across the Mediterranean basin sharing the good news about Jesus with anyone who would listen.

One of the things that facilitated Paul's extensive travels was his status as a Roman citizen. In those days, the boundaries of the Roman Empire stretched across the known world, from modern-day Britain to modern-day India. To be a Roman citizen was to enjoy privileged status under the law and to know that wherever you might travel within the bounds of the empire,

you were protected from harm by the most powerful military the world had ever known.

But a large empire, spanning so many different countries and cultures, is hard to govern. And so throughout the empire, the Romans had taken to appointing and propping up local leaders as client kings. These client kings had two standing orders – ensure that the taxes were collected and remitted back to Rome in full and on time, and keep the peace by whatever means necessary. And to ensure that those orders were carried out, the Romans also sent their own governors to oversee the work of the client kings and to embody Rome’s power and presence in the region. One such Roman governor whose name Christians remember around the world to this day was known as Pontius Pilate. One of Pontius Pilate’s successors, a governor named Felix, features in today’s story.

And so just before we come to our story for today, Paul has returned to Jerusalem after traveling all over the known world sharing the good news about Jesus. But Paul has enemies in Jerusalem, and his enemies have accused him of causing an uproar in that Temple, and seeing that a major disturbance of the peace, verging on a holy war, was about to break out in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested and taken into custody by the Roman authorities. After discovering Paul’s Roman citizenship, the Roman police, in order to protect him from the threat of mob violence in Jerusalem, transported him

under heavy military guard down to the coast, to the Roman city of Caesarea Maritima, where he will stand trial before the Roman governor by the name of Felix.

And so we pick up our story today in Acts 24, beginning at the 14th verse, as Paul presents his defense before Felix. Listen now for a Word from God.

Paul says, *“But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets. I have a hope in God—a hope that they themselves also accept—that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people. Now after some years I came to bring alms to my nation and to offer sacrifices. While I was doing this, they found me in the temple, completing the rite of purification, without any crowd or disturbance. But there were some Jews from Asia—they ought to be here before you to make an accusation, if they have anything against me. Or let these men here tell what crime they had found when I stood before the council, unless it was this one sentence that I called out while standing before them, ‘It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.’”*

But Felix, who was rather well informed about the Way, adjourned the hearing with the comment, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will

decide your case.” Then he ordered the centurion to keep him in custody, but to let him have some liberty and not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs.

Some days later when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus. And as he discussed justice, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you.” At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul, and for that reason he used to send for him very often and converse with him.

After two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

When Felix heard Paul speak plainly about justice and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened.

The concept of justice implies a right relationship between two or more things. When you’re using a word processor, and you want to justify a piece of text, you set that text in relationship to a fixed point on the page called a margin. If your text lines up

with that fixed point of reference, then you can say that it’s justified.

As Christians, we say that we are justified by grace through faith. That is, we say that we are set in right relationship with God not by our own doing, but by God’s grace, and we come to know that grace through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Was there something in Felix’s conscience that made him frightened of the idea of God’s justice? By virtue of his position as the Roman governor, Felix was a very powerful man. Had Felix not been acting justly?

Was it the concept of self-control that frightened Felix? The word that appears here in Acts for self-control only appears one other place in the New Testament – in a letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia in which Paul described for them the fruits of the Holy Spirit that should be evident in their lives if they were truly Christians – fruits like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.¹ As Paul spoke to Felix about the truth of the gospel, was Felix taking inventory of his life and finding a few things lacking?

Was it the concept of the coming judgment that frightened Felix? Let’s be honest, the idea of the inevitable and imminent coming judgment *is* frightening.

And yet if we take Scripture seriously, we know that one day,

¹ Galatians 5:22-23

everything will be brought to light, and there will be an accounting and a reckoning. If we take Scripture seriously, we know that one day, every human being will stand alone before the judgment seat of God and be called to give an account of what we did with the gifts that God poured into our lives.

Felix had a problem that was bigger than the man named Paul who stood before him in chains. Felix's was familiar with this thing called the Way, this group that called themselves Christians. Felix's problem was that he knew that Paul was telling him the truth, but he was too afraid to face it.

And so Felix took the easy way out. Felix took the path that caused the least amount of fuss, that was the most politically expedient. Even though no one had been able to prove a single charge against Paul, Felix kept him in prison for two years, until he was recalled to Rome and his replacement arrived.

When Felix heard about justice, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened.

What about you?

IV

My friend, I have devoted my adult life to the study of the bible. And I have to tell you, it's a strange book. Or, more accurately, a strange collection of 66 books. There are parts of it that are baffling. There are some parts of it that

contradict other parts of it. It's been handled by generations upon generations of people before it's come into our hands, and some of the people who've handled the bible haven't always had pure motives.

So I stand before you my friend fully aware that in many ways, this is a very strange book.

But I also stand before you convinced that despite all of its peculiarities, despite all of its strangeness, the bible is God's Word to you and to me.

And even though the bible is strange, there are some things that are consistent throughout, from the first word to the last. And so insofar as it is possible for me to speak on behalf of God, I can say this – justice and self-control matter deeply to God. That is, how you live in relationship to God and to your fellow human beings matters to God.

When God made the first human and placed the human in God's garden, for the very first time, God declared something in God's creation to be not good. God said, "It is not good that the human should live alone." And so God caused a deep sleep to come over the human, and then God created another human, bone of bone and flesh of flesh, and placed them to live in the garden together – in community.²

And so my friend, how you exercise justice and self-control in your

² Genesis 2:18-23

daily living, that is, the extent to which you live in right relationship with God and with the human beings with whom you share God's planet – that matters deeply to God.

From beginning to end, the bible is clear – you *are indeed* your brother and sister's keeper.³

The Lord *requires* that you do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with God.⁴

You *are* to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength – and *you* are to love your neighbor as you love yourself. As Jesus himself said, on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.⁵

But I have to confess, there are some of the humans with whom I share this planet that I don't feel like loving today. The state of our world has me feeling frightened and angry and despondent. There are some of my fellow human beings who, if I'm honest, if I had the power I might be tempted to lock them up for two years just because I could.

And I suspect that maybe you feel the same way.

If that's you, here's some good news. Jesus didn't say you have to like your neighbor. He didn't say you have to agree with your neighbor. He didn't say you have to hang out on the

weekends with your neighbor. He didn't say you have to keep your mouth shut when your neighbor is being ugly or mean to someone.

And the truth is, some of your neighbors you're not ever going to like, no matter how hard you try. Some of your neighbors are going to make you want to pull your hair and scream because you just can't believe that a human being could be so dumb.

Jesus didn't say you have to educate your neighbor about all the ways in which your neighbor is just plain wrong. He just said that you have to love them.

And one way you can love your neighbor is to treat them justly, no matter what. To hold them in right relationship with yourself and God. One way you can love your neighbor is to practice self-control. Think about that post or comment or text or e-mail before you hit send. When you feel so mad that you want to roar, take a deep breath and count to four. Pray for that person who is driving you up the wall – not that they'd trip and fall on their face, but that God would give them everything you seek in your own life – peace and prosperity and joy and contentment.

V

The bible is a strange book, my friend, no doubt. But if we take it seriously, then we know there will be an exam for all of us, and the extent to

³ Genesis 4:9

⁴ Micah 6:8

⁵ Matthew 22:34-40

which we practiced justice and self-control in our lives will be subjects on the test.

But there's more good news. We've been given the answer key well in advance. We have been given the gift of Jesus. We have been presented with the perfect model of what it looks like to live through every trial and test of this life with justice and self-control.

And so we do not need to be frightened.

We do not need to be despondent.

For we, too, worship the God of our ancestors.

We, too, believe what was written in the law and the prophets.

We, too, have a hope in God – that despite all of the pain and suffering and tests and trials of this life, in the end, there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

And so we, too, must do our best to live with a clear conscience toward God and *all people* –

those whom we like, and those whom we don't.

Those with whom we agree, and those whom we think are as dumb as a bag of hammers.

Those for whom we are glad to be in God's garden together, and those whom we'd like to see locked up for a couple of years.

We must do our best *always* to have a clear conscience toward God and all people until Christ comes again in judgment.

And he is coming.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.