

OPPORTUNITY, LOST FOREVER!

I want to commend all of you this morning for your participation in New Testament Studies, the curriculum we are into this year. Today, I guess depending on how you choose to look at it, we have finished Unit 1, or we are beginning Unit 2. We have completed the reading and study of two books—the Gospel according to Luke and the book of Acts.

Beginning today we commence the study of the Gospel according to Mark, and that will be followed by a study of three of Paul's letters: the book of Romans and his two letters to the church in Corinth. Some of you may have not gotten started yet, but that is alright, because it is never too late to begin doing something that is good.

If you were not in class this morning, and even some of you regulars may not have missed because you forgot the time change, you can still pick up the study booklet for Unit 2 in the foyer. We want everyone to have one of these, and please put your name on it. In fact, if you received your new book this morning and haven't put your name on it yet, please take a moment to do that right now.

Remember these lessons are for both Sunday morning and Wednesday nights. If you aren't making it to both classes, you are missing the frosting. You may be getting the cake, but you are missing the frosting! That is where we get to share in a discussion of the things we are reading, and if you any questions about what you are reading, you have the chance to get an answer.

I hope you are reading and I hope you are having questions. I hope you are really getting into the Word of God because that is one of the best ways for God's Word to get into you! And if you are staying up with us, I know you know there are some things that we are covering that are worth a little more consideration. And that is why I try to do in these Sunday morning lessons, and this past week there were some things that really caught my attention because they deal with something that is critical to every one of us. I am speaking about the opportunity of getting right with the God that made us; the God we have made angry by our sins.

There is little that is more unpleasant for us to remember than opportunities we missed in life. We probably all have some of those, things we missed simply because we failed to see the true value and potential of an opportunity. I can recall once being part of a discussion with several Christian brothers with regard to purchasing a piece of land. Our church in Rancho Cordova, California had considered buying this piece of land, but failed to do so because it was zoned for commercial development and the zoning board would not give a waiver to the church. It was about ten acres or so and would have cost each of us about ten thousand dollars. To make a long story short, we didn't act but someone else did, and just a few years later the property was sold for several million dollars!

Incidentally, when I speak about opportunity, I want you to know I am not speaking about the kind of opportunity touted by all of these casinos around here! I do not think of that as opportunity; that is stupidity! Now, if that offends you, I'm sorry, but if you are going to the casinos, you are not very smart and you are not honoring God. People gamble for one reason and one reason only. I've heard all of the excuses. "I do it for fun." "I set aside just a certain amount and when that's gone, I quit." Some people say, "It's no different than investing" or "it's a gamble when you get up every morning."

When we want to do something wrong, we can always come up with an excuse but that doesn't change the fact that people gamble for one reason, and that is because they are driven by the love of money. They are not satisfied with what they have and they want more, but they don't want to work for it.

That is not the kind of lost opportunity that we saw in our reading this past week. You recall, of course the opportunity missed by Felix, in chapter 24, and it sounds like he missed it not just once but over and over again. Then there was the missed opportunity of King Agrippa in chapter 26, and then there was the one missed by a number of Jews in Rome, told about in chapter 28.

There was also at least one other opportunity in our reading this past week, and we will take a look at that one as well before we close this morning.

Acts 24, Paul before the governor of Judea named Felix.

In Acts 23, we find the apostle Paul, having been arrested is brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin Council, which also served as the highest court for settling Jewish matters. After Paul mentions that he was on trial for the hope of the resurrection, the council members who were Pharisees, and believed in the resurrection, declared that Paul was not guilty of doing anything wrong. The members who were Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection became upset and dissension broke out and Paul had to be rescued by the Roman soldiers. After that a plot was made on Paul's life, and so Paul was sent under the protection of two hundred soldiers to the governor's headquarters in Caesarea, which was located on the Mediterranean coast about 55 miles away, "as the crow flies."

Five days later the Jews arrive and they bring accusations against Paul, and Felix then gives Paul the opportunity to defend himself against their claims. Paul essentially responds that the charges brought against him were simply not true. They had namely accused him of stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world, and that he profaned the temple in Jerusalem. Felix put off making any decision but then not many days later, Luke tells us that Felix and his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus.

I want to read what happened then, according to **verse 25**, but let me read it to you out of the Message, which is one of those versions that tend to be a little more expressive. We read:

“As Paul continued to insist on right relations with God and his people, about a life of moral discipline and the coming Judgment, Felix felt things getting a little too close for comfort and dismissed him. “That’s enough for today. I’ll call you back when it’s convenient.”

I think that happens to a lot of people, don’t you!

Luke goes on to tell us that Felix was hoping someone would come along and offer him some money, a ransom if you will, for Paul’s release. That never happened, but Luke tells us that for a period of about two years, Paul remained a prisoner, but that Felix called and spoke with Paul a number of times. As far as we know, however, Felix never became a Christian.

Acts 26, Paul before King Agrippa.

After two years, another governor was appointed, a man by the name of Festus. He just continued holding Paul as a prisoner, but after a few days he went down to Jerusalem and while he was there, the Jewish leaders who were still hostile towards Paul found the opportunity to talk with him and suggested to him that he bring Paul to Jerusalem where he could stand trial before the Sanhedrin again. Festus told them they could bring their charges against Paul in Caesarea, and so a few days later, we have a repeat of what had happened earlier. The Jews began accusing Paul of all kinds of crimes, and Paul argued he had not done any of the things that he was accused of. So Festus asked him if he would be willing to go down to Jerusalem and stand trial. Paul said, he was already standing before an official Roman court, and he was not afraid of a fair trial. On the other hand, if Festus is thinking about passing the buck to someone else, Paul said, “I appeal to Caesar.” That was simply his way of doing what was the right of every Roman citizen, which was to have a case involving capital punishment heard by a special court appointed by Caesar.

So Festus had no choice but to keep Paul as a prisoner and prepare to send him on to Rome. But before arrangements could be made, Festus received a visit from the king named Herod Agrippa. He was actually Herod Agrippa II, the son of the Herod Agrippa I, whom we read about in Acts 12, and the one who had James killed. He was also the great grandson of Herod the Great, the one who slaughtered the male infants during the time of Christ’s birth. Herod was king of Judea, and as such held some status above Festus the governor. So Festus took advantage of this visit to seek some advice. He tells Agrippa about Paul’s case and says, the man has appealed to Caesar, but I’m kind of at a loss as to know what I ought to say are charges against him. So Agrippa agrees to meet and hear from Paul.

Paul thanks Agrippa for allowing him the opportunity to speak because he knows Herod is somewhat familiar with the beliefs and ways of the Jews, being a Jew himself, at least in name. Paul’s defense is basically a retelling of his story, of how he came to be a believer in and a proclaimer of Christ’s gospel. As Paul relates his experience of how he was confronted by Christ in a blinding light, he says—beginning in **verse 19**:

"Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20) but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. 21) For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22) To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23) that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."

At that point, Paul is interrupted by the governor Festus. He says, *"Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind."*

But Paul answers (verse 25),

"I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26) For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. 27) King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." 28) And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" 29) And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am--except for these chains."

The King James versions renders **verse 28**: *"Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."* Was he being sincere, or was he being cynical? You can judge that for yourself, but we do know this much, he had been given the opportunity to hear and learn about Christ, and there is no indication, either in scripture or secular history books, that he ever did.

Chapter 28, Paul before the Jewish leaders in Rome.

After preaching to Agrippa, Paul is finally shipped off to Rome, and chapter 27 contains the really interesting story of that voyage. In chapter 28, Paul finally reaches Italy, and the city of Rome, where he was placed under house arrest, but given the opportunity to freely proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God to people as they came to him.

Some of those who came were the leaders of the Jews in Rome. Evidently word began to spread pretty quickly in the local synagogues and so they wanted to find out for themselves just who this man was and what he was doing.

Verses 21 and 22 says,

"And they said to him, "We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. 22) But we

desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against."

So a short time later, Paul meets with them and they too have the opportunity to hear and learn the truth. Beginning in **verse 23** we read,

When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. 24) And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.

Some were convinced, but others disbelieved. Here is something for you to think about. One day, if you are a Christian and die in the Lord, you will probably meet some of those souls that were convinced. But those other souls, the ones who did not believe, don't look for them in heaven. They won't be there. Theirs was an OPPORTUNITY, LOST FOREVER!

Now, we could easily spend a lot of time exploring the "whys" and "wherefores" of each of these examples, but you know where I'm going with this. The real question that we need to be asking is not why did these people fail to take advantage of the opportunity to be saved, but what have we done with that opportunity? Have we put it off for another time? Have we listened and listened until we are listened out, but still have yet to make a decision. The Bible does say something about those who are *"ever learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth."*

Week after week the truth is preached from this pulpit and from hundreds and thousands of other places around the world, and week after week, some are convinced, but many are not. For sure, the time is coming when you will hear the truth for the very last time. If you knew when that time was, you would not have a problem. But of course, you don't know, none of us do, but it is coming. Are you ready? Have you availed yourself of every opportunity God has given you to know the truth and be saved?

I mentioned there is one more story in our reading this week.

It is that story told in the 27th chapter about disastrous voyage to Rome. You remember—if you've been reading along with us—you remember; it's there in verses 27-32. The ship had encountered a violent storm. For days they were driven by the winds, beat upon by the waves, and they had to jettison as much of the cargo and equipment as possible. **Verse 20** says, *"When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned."*

Paul tried to encourage them, telling them that an angel of God had appeared to him and told him there would be no loss of life, and that he, Paul, would have the opportunity to stand before Caesar.

Verses 27-32 picks up the story there:

But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land. 28) They took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found it to be fifteen fathoms. 29) Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak. 30) But as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and had let down the ship's boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow, 31) Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved." 32) Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship's boat and let it fall away.

Unless you stay in the ship, you cannot be saved. That is what many people need to hear today. I am thinking of the church as the ship. You were baptized into Christ and God added you to His church. You came on board, so to speak. You saw the opportunity and you seized it, but you need to keep this in mind: that opportunity can be squandered if you don't stay in the ship.

So when you are tempted to abandon the ship, or when you find yourself barely hanging on to the ship, kind of like that little dingy being pulled along behind by a rope, you need heed these words: *Unless you remain in the ship, you cannot be saved.*"

I wouldn't give a "plug-nickel" for the chances of Governor Felix, or of King Agrippa, or for most of those leaders of the Jews in Rome, because for those people, the opportunity to be saved forever, was lost forever. One day they sat where many of you are now sitting. The moment of opportunity came, and they passed it by. Some, like Felix, have had that opportunity presented to them again and again, but the more it is rejected, the harder it becomes to accept it.

2 Corinthians 6:1-2

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. 2) For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

The opportunity is yours. Don't let it be lost forever. Please come as together we stand and sing