

Joseph and His Brothers

Dr. J. R. Beeke

Psalter 351

Scripture: Gen. 44:14 - Gen. 45:5

Text: Gen. 45:3-4

Psalter 297

Psalter 143:1, 3

Psalter 32

Our text words you can find in Genesis 45:3-4: “And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence. And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt.”

With God’s help, we wish to consider with you:

Joseph and His Brothers

1. Betraying Joseph as an Enemy
2. Meeting Joseph as a Judge
3. Knowing Joseph as a Deliverer

Dear congregation, recently I received a letter from a child who wrote, “Would you please preach a sermon about Joseph and his brothers?” Today we are going to try to do that with God’s help. But I want to do that in a way, boys and girls, that you may be able to understand it. I know sometimes sermons are hard for children, but today we will try to make it very simple. I hope when you go home after this service that you will tell your mom and your dad what the sermon was about, but above all, boys and girls, that the Lord may bless this sermon to your heart, because the same thing that Joseph’s brothers needed, you and I also need. You cannot be too young, dear children, to seek the Lord, even if you are only three

or four years old. You may still ask the Lord, “Give me a new heart.” The Lord is almighty. And I hope, boys and girls, that you are often asking Him, “Lord, teach me how to pray.”

I think many of you know the story of Joseph and his brothers quite well already, and yet, boys and girls, there is something wonderful about the stories of the Bible. No matter how well we know those stories, there is always something new to learn, not only in our mind but also in our heart. You will remember, I think, that when Joseph and his brothers were very young, they didn’t get along so well. Not one of Joseph’s brothers liked him. That would be something, wouldn’t it? Many of you have many brothers and sisters. How would you feel if you didn’t have one brother or sister that liked you—if they all hated you? That would be very sad. I hope, boys and girls, that all of you love your brothers and sisters, and that you don’t do bad things or say naughty words to your brothers and sisters. You must treat each other with love.

There was a problem in Joseph’s family. Joseph’s father, whose name as you know was Jacob, kept giving more things to Joseph than he did to the other brothers. That was not very wise of Jacob. That was a mistake. The result was that Joseph’s brothers became very envious of Joseph. How would you feel if one of your brothers or sisters received most of the toys and gifts from your mom and dad and you received very little? Jacob, of course, gave something to all of his sons, but he gave special things to Joseph. Thus they hated Joseph. They were angry with Joseph. They didn’t want to have anything to do with Joseph. If Joseph would come along and try to play with them or do something with them, they would send him away. Later when they became teenagers and young men, they would go out to the fields to work. One day Jacob called Joseph and said, “Joseph, go out to the fields and find out where your brothers are.” And what did Joseph say? Did he say, “No, father, I won’t do that because my brothers don’t like me”? No; he was willing. He went out to look for brothers who hated him.

And so Joseph went to the fields. He arrived at one field and his brothers weren't there. He was told, "No, they're not in Shechem anymore; they're in another place called Dothan." Thus Joseph went to Dothan to look for his brothers. Do you remember, boys and girls, what happened when he got to Dothan? His brothers threw him into a pit. They weren't so easy on Joseph. They sat down to eat, and you can be sure that Joseph was crying in that pit. It hurt to be cast away. It was a very hard time for Joseph, but his brothers all sat down content.

What happened next? Since Joseph's brothers were tired of Joseph's dreams too because he told them that they would bow before him one day, they said to one another, "Let's get rid of this dreamer and his dreams." And so they sold him. They sold him for the cheapest price possible for a slave. In those days the lowest price for the most worthless slave was twenty shekels of silver, and that's what they sold Joseph for. They sold him as if he were the most worthless person on earth.

And now, boys and girls, you have to listen carefully. In all these things I have been telling you so far, Joseph was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ who comes from all eternity. He was born in Bethlehem's manger to make a long journey, to seek and to save sinners like you and I are. He goes into the field of the church; He comes especially on Sunday to seek sinners in His house. Jesus Christ is the Greater Joseph who goes from field to field and city to city to seek His brethren whom God has given to Him from all eternity. Before there was anything on this world, Jesus said to His Father in eternity, "Lo, I come...to do Thy will, O God." He was more willing than Joseph was. There was never anyone so willing as Jesus Christ to do the will of His Father. His whole life was to be about His Father's work.

When Jesus comes to seek sinners, just like Joseph, He is hated. Joseph was hated for his person and his words—for his person because he was the favorite son of his father; for his words because of his dreams. Jesus is hated because He is the God-man, but He is also hated be-

cause He says, "I tell you the truth. 'The world cannot hate you; but Me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil'" When Jesus comes in the life of a sinner, boys and girls, He tells that sinner that he is a sinner, and we don't want to hear that we are sinners. By nature we are at enmity with Jesus, with God, and with our neighbor. We are no better than Joseph's brothers. Do you remember in the New Testament how many shekels Jesus was sold for by Judas? Thirty shekels of silver. That was the lowest price for a slave in New Testament times, just as twenty was in Old Testament times. Thus Jesus was that greater Joseph who, like Joseph, was hated by His brothers, sold for the lowest price, and still went out to seek His brothers. He is the Greater Joseph.

But now, boys and girls, the very worst thing of all is that you and I with our lives and sins also sell and crucify the Lord Jesus. No, that doesn't mean that we were standing there physically by the cross, but I mean in our hearts. You know, boys and girls, we can be guilty of something even if we don't do it. If we just think about it, if we think bad thoughts, that's sinful too. You see, we grow up not loving God as we should unless the Lord gives us a new heart, but by nature we grow up not desiring God. We are enemies of God. We don't want to admit that we are sinners. We want to sit down like Joseph's brothers, saying, "Away with Him." We want to sit down content, just like Joseph's brothers. How sad it is that Joseph's brothers had so much enmity against him that they could be content to leave Joseph alone while he was in the pit. Similarly, boys and girls, our great problem is that we are content to leave Jesus alone when He is on the cross. Though He still says to us today that He is willing to be the Savior also of sinful boys and girls, we will have nothing to do with Him. We sit down content without a new heart, without Christ. We are content to go straight to hell. We are content to be without God. We are content to be without a Savior for our soul. What a sad thing! These brothers wanted to sell Joseph. They wanted never to see Joseph again. Never! And what do we want, boys and

girls? By nature, if God just keeps giving us food and clothing and all that we need, for the rest we say (and it's terrible to have to say it), "Lord, leave us alone." We want to live our own lives. We don't want to be bothered by the Lord, just like Joseph's brothers didn't want to be bothered with Joseph.

But now, what God does is wonderful. Joseph was sold, and his brothers were glad. They thought, "Now we will never see Joseph again." But man proposes, and God disposes. That means, man can do something, but the Lord rules in the heavens. And twenty years later—that's older than all of you, boys and girls, Joseph and his brothers would meet again, but in a very surprising way. In the meantime Jacob was very sad because he thought he had lost his son Joseph. He said, "All these things are against me." What Jacob didn't realize is that all these things were for him.

Dear children of God in our midst, what an encouragement it is that God reigns! Once Jacob said, "All these things are against me," but later he said, "It is enough." In the original language it reads, "It is all"; in other words, "I have everything."

The Lord's ways are so far above our ways. That Ishmaelitish caravan was God's divine chariot to convey Joseph to the throne of Egypt. But what a hard way it was for Joseph! It was bad enough being in the pit, but now he came to Potiphar's house, and you know, boys and girls, what happened there. He was accused of something he did not do, and that man, Potiphar, believed his ungodly, sinful wife more than he believed godly Joseph. What happened to Joseph then? They cast him into prison. That was his second pit. And then what happened? You will remember that when he was in prison he told the butler and the baker the meaning of their dreams. The butler was restored to his position and the baker died. But the butler was supposed to remember Joseph, wasn't he? He returned to Pharaoh's courts and forgot all about Joseph for two more years. That was another trial for Joseph.

Then Pharaoh had a dream, didn't he? He told that

dream but no one could understand it. Finally the butler said to Pharaoh, "Oh, now I remember, there is a man named Joseph in prison who can interpret dreams." Then Pharaoh called for Joseph and Joseph came in front of Pharaoh. Pharaoh said, "I have heard, Joseph, that you can interpret dreams." And what did Joseph say? Did he say, "Yes I can"? No. Did he say, "Well, king, with the help of the Lord I may be able to"? No. What did he say? He said, "It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace."

And now, boys and girls, I want you to think about those words; "It is not in me" Do you realize how much Joseph learned in the pit, in prison, and through being forgotten? He learned a lot. When he was younger he never said, "It is not in me." He said to his brothers, "I have a dream. You shall all bow before me. I will be something, and you will be under me." But when he came into a pit, into prison, and then was forgotten, what was the Lord doing? He was doing just what Joseph needed. He was stripping Joseph down, bit by bit, so that there was nothing of Joseph left. Now even when Joseph had an opportunity to say something good about himself, he said, "It is not in me." That took grace, boys and girls. That took great grace.

And then Pharaoh told him his dream and Joseph explained it. There would be seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. Pharaoh then set Joseph up as a sort of vice-president, we would say today, over the whole country. Thus people brought corn for seven years and they built up a big supply of corn for people all over the world for the seven years of famine that were to come. In those seven years people came from all over the world to Joseph to buy corn.

Now Joseph's brothers also had to come, didn't they? Yes, indeed. They ran out of corn too. They came and Joseph said to them, "You are spies." Joseph was known to them by a very long name. Try to remember it. It was Zaphnath-paaneah. They didn't realize he was Joseph. Joseph knew them, but they didn't know Joseph. When

Joseph came to his brothers and said, "You are spies," they said, "No, we are true men," or in the original language of the Bible, "We are pious men." In other words, "We are religious, God-fearing men." And did Joseph say, "Oh, that's wonderful that you are so pious, religious, and true"? No; Joseph put them into prison for three days—not out of anger, but out of love. "Love?" you say. "Is it loving to put someone in prison?" Boys and girls, Joseph had to teach his brothers that they could not have his heart until they had repented of their sin. We cannot find the Lord and be at peace with God until we know what it means to be lost and to repent of our sins. The world today is filled with people who have Jesus on their lips but they have never made confession with their hearts.

If you have a strong disagreement with someone, say your brother or sister, you cannot become one again until you confess. You cannot have reconciliation—that means, you cannot be one again—until you first have confession, until you first say, "I'm sorry." So it is between God and us in spiritual life. We must truly be sorry for our sin shall we be reconciled to the Lord.

Joseph's brothers were finally freed from prison and they went back home, but soon they ran out of corn again. And what did they do the second time? The second time they put all kinds of things together. They had saved their best food for last to bring to Joseph—fruits, balm, honey, spices, myrrh, nuts, and almonds. They also brought double money and, as Joseph had commanded, Benjamin. They came to him with the very best that they had, thinking, "If we give everything to him, Zaphnath-Paaneah won't be so angry and stern with us and be so much like a judge."

Boys and girls, that is just what happens when God works in the heart of a sinner. He makes that person feel he is a sinner and makes him hungry for the Lord. He runs out of corn, so to speak. He has nothing spiritually to eat. He cannot make ends meet with all his works, his prayers, and his tears. He becomes very hungry. He must have the Lord. And thus he comes to the Lord. But when he comes

to the Lord, the Lord doesn't begin right away with Jesus Christ. Rather, the Lord begins as Joseph began, with rough questions. "Whence come ye? Where are you from?" And when the Lord first begins, we say, "Lord, we are true men. We are concerned about our sins and we really want to be saved." But the Lord has to teach us, boys and girls, that there is so much wrong inside of our hearts. We first need to feel that we are unsaved before we can feel saved. We first need to feel that we are lost before we can feel that we are found. Sometimes the Lord will give a little encouragement to seeking souls, and that may be a little food to eat for a while, but the time comes again when they cannot live without the Lord. They have to go back a second time. And the further the Lord leads His child, even if it is a boy or girl of seven years old, then that child will experience that he or she will bring his or her very best to God. In other words, we will try to impress the Lord. That's what happens.

Well, what did Joseph do? He sent his brothers to his house and there the servant met them. They were very worried and afraid. They thought, "I don't know why we have to go to his house. This is very scary." But the servant smiled at them and spoke kind words to them. He said, "Peace be to you." But that didn't solve their problem; they had to hear that from Joseph's mouth. It is the same thing, boys and girls, with a lost sinner. It is one thing to have someone else say, "The Lord is working in your heart. Peace be to you." But that's not enough. We must hear it from the Lord through His Word that there is salvation also for us.

The Bible says something very interesting. They were waiting for Joseph to come home, and it says that they made ready the present for Joseph who came at noon. They were working until the very last moment when Joseph came. How surprised they were when Joseph came, because he set them down in the order of their age. He knew all about them, it seemed. He gave them food and was kind to them; he sent them away with money, with food, and with Benjamin, whom they were so worried

about. And while they were eating, the Bible says, "They drank, and were merry with him." They thought that everything was well. And in the morning they went home. They had their corn; they paid double for it; nobody was left behind; the ruler had been kind to them. They could hardly wait to tell Jacob. Everything was fine after all.

And yet, boys and girls, everything was not fine. They had still not confessed to Joseph. There are so many people today who are traveling to eternity with a religion that gives them, so to speak, full sacks and double money. They seem to have everything, but if you ask them how they received it and how they were emptied and how they became a lost sinner before God as a holy Judge, their mouth is closed. Oh, boys and girls, we need to know how God saves a sinner! Many times these people who always have their sacks full and can always speak about wonderful things in religion can even make a child of God jealous, but it is nothing to be jealous about. You could better be jealous of those whose sacks are empty and who are poor beggars waiting for a crumb from the Master's table. Joseph's brothers had yet to learn that.

But it was soon to happen. For while they were traveling back to Jacob, they heard a voice behind them. It was Joseph's steward and he was calling them to stop! They stopped and he said, "You have a cup, the silver cup of my lord. Wherefore have ye rewarded my master evil for all his good?" But the brothers were sure the cup was not in their sacks, so they took down all their sacks and opened them—and the cup was found! In whose sack? In Benjamin's sack.

Benjamin here, boys and girls, is also a type of Christ. The cup of sin was placed upon Christ and He had to bear the price of sin for His people. But there is another meaning here also. We have to learn in our lives that we have rewarded evil to the Lord for all His good. Now the Lord is finally beginning to teach these brothers important lessons. Had that happened twenty years ago, that that cup was found in Benjamin's sack, they would have sent Benjamin back alone—just as they left Joseph alone. But

this time they all went back with him, everyone in whose sacks no cup was found. They all went back to Joseph.

Boys and girls, we all have to learn that we all have to go back to Adam. It was not just Adam who ate of that fruit in Paradise. You and I have hearts just like him, and we have to be brought back to Paradise. That means we have to learn how sinful we are, that our whole hearts are filled with sin.

They returned to Joseph, and Joseph, the Bible says, “was yet there.” What a mercy! When sinners come back to God after years of sin, God is yet there. On the day of judgment it will be too late to repent. But Joseph was yet there. When a poor, lost sinner comes back to the Lord, dear children, he can hardly believe that the Lord would still be there to hear his cries and receive his tears after so many years of sin. That’s true if you are seventy years old, but it is also true if you are seven years old. If you are seven years old and the Lord begins with you tonight, you would say, “Lord, how could I have sinned so many years against Thee? Wilt Thou still be there? Wilt Thou still hear the cry of a sinner like I am?” If you are fifty years old and you look at that seven-year-old boy or girl, you say, “He or she is so young to be converted, so young in sin,” but, boys and girls, if the Lord works savingly in our life we will feel like we have sinned far too long, that we are old in sin, no matter how young we are.

Joseph was still there. This time everything was different. This time Judah stepped forward—we read it to you—and he said, “God has found out our iniquity.” This time all their excuses were lost. This time Judah offered to be a surety for his brother Benjamin. He said, “Spare Benjamin, and condemn me,” and that was like sweet music in the ears of Joseph because that was what Joseph had been waiting for all this time, namely, that his brothers would become guilty before him. He was waiting to hear that they were willing to be a surety for Benjamin. Joseph read between the lines of Judah’s confession and realized that Judah was the guilty one for the sin com-

mitted many years ago. Moreover, he saw that all the brothers agreed with Judah.

Then Joseph could hold himself back no longer. He was longing to make himself known to his brothers. He said, "Send all the Egyptians out of the room," and they all left. Joseph was crying. But that doesn't mean that they were forgiven yet. They didn't know what was happening. Tears do not mean forgiveness. Joseph was crying. They wondered what was happening. They didn't know. They had come back before Joseph as Zaphnath-paaneah, and he was a judge who had every right to condemn them. He was vice-president under Pharaoh. He could kill them. Then finally Joseph opened his mouth and said, "I am Joseph." Joseph? They looked at each other; they were troubled. Do you know why they were troubled? Because in Israel if you sold another Israelite into slavery you should receive a death sentence. That means, if you sold a brother Hebrew into slavery you had to be killed. They had sold Joseph as a slave to the Ishmaelites, so immediately when they heard the words, "I am Joseph," they thought, "That means we have to die, for we have sold our brother into slavery." They were troubled at his presence. They came before him as a judge, and they had to perish.

And now, boys and girls, it is the same way with a poor sinner. When he is brought back before the Lord as a Judge, then the Lord is just like a greater Joseph. It seems that the Lord has to condemn them. He is too holy to let them go. It seems they have to die. They have sinned too much and they have no excuses. They have to die.

But then Joseph said something else. He said, "Come near to me, I pray you...I am Joseph, your brother." Then he poured out his love, and they who betrayed him as an enemy and who came before him as a judge now would come to know him as a great deliverer. We will see that after we sing first from Psalter 143, stanzas 1 and 3.

APPLICATION

"I am Joseph." Oh, what an amazing thing, boys and

girls! "Joseph. We thought he was Zaphnath-paaneah, and here he is Joseph." Those brothers could hardly believe their ears. But then he said, "Come near to me, I pray you," and they saw his tears and felt his love. Their hearts were won over. They could not run away; they first dared not go to him. But when he said, "Come near to me, I pray you," and when he repeated it, "I am Joseph your brother," there was too much love in his words, too many tears on his face, for them to believe that he would exercise the death penalty. No, it was just the opposite. They suddenly saw love in Joseph instead of judgment. They saw inexpressible love. "I am Joseph your brother." Boys and girls, there was so much love there. Here was a man who was the second most important man, so to speak, in the whole world, and he said, "I am not ashamed to be called the brother of brothers who have betrayed me and sold me as the lowest person on earth. I will not sell you, my brothers. I will give you love for your hatred, and I will give you food for your selling me into slavery. I will render you good for evil." This is amazing love! "I am Joseph your brother."

Dear boys and girls, this love of Joseph, though it was so great, was not as great as the love of Jesus, the Greater Joseph, to His people, for we have all become sinners and we all deserve to be cast away as slaves, but instead we have cast Christ away. But Christ comes back to His people and He draws poor sinners to Himself saying as it were, "I am the Greater Joseph, your Elder Brother. I am not ashamed to be called your Brother, even though I am King of kings and Lord of lords and the whole universe belongs to Me. I am not ashamed to be called an Elder Brother of brothers who have sold Me and crucified Me and would have nothing to do with Me."

In these words, "I am Joseph," the gospel is freely preached. The Greater Joseph arose from the dead that He may be the firstborn among many brethren. And when He arose after all His sufferings, He said, "Go tell my brethren and Peter that I will meet them in Galilee." Oh, congregation, is there any love like that love? We

have said, "Away with Him, crucify Him!" When Peter said, "I know not the man," Jesus arose from the dead and said, "Go tell my brethren and Peter"—Peter is still a brother—"that I will meet them in Galilee." "I am Joseph your brother, your deliverer, your redeemer. Fear ye not: I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt." Joseph did not overlook their sin—he reminded them of it—but he reminded them of their sin to magnify his grace. And still today, when God comes to remind His people of their sins, He does not do that to punish them, for their punishment is paid by Jesus Christ, but He reminds them of their sins to magnify His grace.

Here was Joseph giving his love to brothers who sold him into Egypt as a type of Jesus Christ who keeps loving those who have betrayed Him and are unworthy of Him. "I am Joseph." That word "am" never changes. That is the present tense. It is an eternal present tense. "I shall always be the Greater Joseph," Jesus would say. "I shall never be changeable. I shall always take care of My people, no matter how they treat Me, no matter how My Peters deny Me, no matter how My children betray Me and sell Me short."

"I am Joseph." It was as if Joseph said to his brothers, "Brothers, no matter how much you did to me, no matter how much you would still do to me, I am still Joseph, your brother. That blood tie cannot be broken. I am your brother." And until this very day Jesus Christ remains faithful unto His people, no matter how they treat Him. That's the gospel. You remember from Lord's Day 19 that wonderful phrase our instructor uses when he says, "What comfort is it to thee that 'Christ shall come again to judge the quick and the dead'? That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head I look for the very same Person, who before offered Himself for my sake, to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as Judge from heaven: who shall cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall translate me with all His chosen ones to Himself, into heavenly joys and glory." That "very same Person." "I am

what I am. I am the Greater Joseph and I cannot change. I am tied with everlasting blood ties of heavenly adoption, from the stillness of the eternal council of peace, unto My people, and no matter what they have done, I cannot break those blood ties.”

“I am Joseph your brother.” That’s the hope and the future for God’s people. Dear congregation, do you know a brother like the Lord Jesus Christ who is faithful in everything? “I am Joseph.”

Now his brothers could truly go home happy. They fell on his neck, they wept, they kissed him. Now they had reconciliation, following confession. And now they realized that before they had never confessed and they never were reconciled. Now they had everything. Now they had a real story to tell Jacob.

Boys and girls, dear congregation, have we ever met the Greater Joseph as Judge, but also, have we ever met Him as Savior? Do we know what it means to expect to perish on account of sin, but also, do we know what it means to hear from His mouth, through His Word, by His Spirit, “I am Joseph your Brother”? Then a child of God sees that everything is to be found in Christ. He has done everything. Joseph had everything ready for his brothers—the sacks, the corn, the money—he had everything they needed. Jesus Christ is the Greater Joseph who has the greater storehouse. Of that storehouse we read in Luke 15, that in Him there is bread enough and to spare. There is no emptying of the fullness of Christ. He is the perfect and the Greater Joseph.

Either we know this Greater Joseph or we know Him not. And if we do not know Him, dear congregation, oh, I appeal to your consciences and I beg you for your own soul’s sake, allow yourself no rest until you find Him. Can you bring yourself there? No, but you do have knees that bend, you do have hands that fold, and you do have lips that speak. Ask the Lord to teach you who this Greater Joseph is, and to teach you your sin, that you may need Him, that you cannot live without Him, and that you can-

not rest until He is revealed to your heart by the power of the Holy Ghost.

“I am Joseph your brother.” Does that mean that Joseph’s brothers had no more troubles in their life? No, it doesn’t mean that. They were truly happy now. But the doubts would come again. “The doubts?” you say. Yes, the doubts. How do we know that? We know that from Genesis 50. Jacob died, and suddenly Joseph’s brothers were worried. They thought to themselves, “Now Joseph will still take revenge.” And thus they sent a messenger; they were afraid to come before him. They sent a messenger with this message, “Behold, we be thy servants.” And what did Joseph do? He wept again and he called his brothers and they bowed down before him. His dream was fulfilled in the process again. But they bowed down before him and then he said some wonderful words. When they bowed before him and said, “Behold, we be thy servants,” he answered, “Fear ye not: I will nourish you.”

Dear child of God, when you have tasted of the riches of Christ and the doubts come in again like a flood, oh, do like Joseph’s brothers: Bow before Him and say, “Behold, we be Thy servants.” That means slaves, willing servitude—and wait at the gates of His house. He will say—and how sweet it is when you hear Him say it by renewal—“Fear ye not: I will nourish you.” He is a rich God to a poor and a dependent people.

Thus, boys and girls, I want to commend to you that God who is like the Greater Joseph. In Jesus Christ there is room also for boys and girls to be saved. Seek Him, children, while you are young. Call upon Him while He is near. AMEN.

Felix Under the Preaching of the Word of God

Dr. J. R. Beeke

Psalter 60:1-3
Scripture: Acts 24:22-27
Text: Acts 24:24-25
Psalter 317
Psalter 265:1,2
Psalter 420:1,2

Dear congregation, there is nothing so uncertain in this world as our life and nothing so certain as our death. It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment. It is said in our modern day that eighty-five percent of the things which run through our mind in regard to plans and goals never materialize. Yet you and I spend a great deal of time thinking, planning, worrying, about those things, most of which never transpire. There is one thing, however, that shall transpire for every one of us. Death can call for us while we are still young; it can come when we are older. But it is reality, my friends, that death is near and inescapable.

We must be prepared to die. We must not imitate the rich fool who said, "This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater.... And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." On the contrary, we must live temperately, soberly, preparedly. We must seek grace to be prepared to meet God. We must not allow ourselves rest without a right foundation for meeting Him.

Death always comes sooner than we think. The day is coming soon when we will sit under our last sermon, receive our last invitation, hear our last warning. After that it shall be forever too late to seek the Lord. Today I desire to show you the solemn reality of this truth clearly spelled out in the tragic history of Felix. Our text is Acts 24:24-25:

“And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.”

With God’s help, we wish to consider:

Felix Under the Preaching of the Word of God

1. Hearing the Word
2. Trembling Before that Word
3. Rejecting that Word

Acts 24 records another phase of the life of the apostle Paul, the world’s most famous missionary. The missionary Paul could rightly claim that he had labored more abundantly than any apostle. His life and heart were bound up with the gospel message of death in Adam and life in Christ which he felt called to bring. Paul yearned with an unquenchable passion to proclaim to sinners, young and old, “There is only one Name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Paul was willing to count all loss and dung that he might win Christ and be found in Him. To spread the truth was his calling, his burden, his life.

Many times Paul’s calling was tested, especially when his life was threatened, but he had to press on at all costs. Though frequently stoned, beaten with stripes, and suffering shipwreck, he wrote to the Corinthians, “Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” Necessity was laid upon him.

In the context of Acts 24 Paul faced a new trial—*house imprisonment*. For two years he was forbidden to publicly proclaim the Word of God. What a trial this was for the apostle! During his lifetime he had brought God’s Word before Agrippa, the Sanhedrin, Sergius Paulus, Festus, even the Emperor Nero himself, but was deprived unjustly of proclaiming that precious Word in the congregations to souls whom he longed to see saved and built up

in the most holy faith. Paul had to learn no doubt, in those hard two years that the Lord could carry on His work without him. But still there must have been a longing in his heart to proclaim God's Word.

Suddenly, however, Paul unexpectedly received a remarkable invitation to lead a church service in the palace of the Roman governor for the governor and his wife, Felix and Drusilla. "And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ."

To understand how special this invitation was, we have to know something about Felix and Drusilla. Felix was a very corrupt man who had astonished nearly the whole world in his time by acquiring a high position in Roman government through bribery, despite his lack of education. Once in power Felix astonished many with his brutal injustice, cruel murders, and impure life. Several times Felix almost lost his position as governor, but repeatedly managed to maintain his position through payoffs. All the while Felix remained a slave of the devil and of sin.

Drusilla was Felix's third wife. At the time of the history in Acts 24 Felix was in his sixties. Drusilla was a young girl of seventeen. She was a daughter of Agrippa I, a sister of Agrippa II, and a grandchild of Herod the Great. This young woman had also lived wickedly. She was engaged as a very young teenager to Antiochus Epiphanes, a prince of another country. The marriage did not take place because he refused to be circumcised, which was a sign of being converted to the Jewish religion. Thus this young girl had some feeling for religion in an outward way, but did not live godly herself. Later on, when she was sixteen years old, she married Azizus, the King of the Amesenes, a territory in northern Syria. Josephus tells us that she was a remarkably beautiful young woman and Felix desired to have her. With the help of Simon the Sorcerer, Felix influenced her to desert her husband in order to marry him. Thus the elderly Felix and his young bride Drusilla entered into an unlawful marriage to the further ruination of their lives.

Soon after they were married they took a trip. Today we would call it a honeymoon. They spoke together on this trip about the apostle Paul who was imprisoned under Felix's domain. Drusilla's grandfather Herod had greatly desired to hear John the Baptist. Something of that curiosity, that spirit of inquisitiveness, was in Drusilla as well. Felix too was a bit curious as to what this man who was preaching the name of Jesus Christ would have to say. Thus Felix and Drusilla determined to hear a sermon from Paul's own mouth.

Upon their return from their honeymoon, they invited Paul to appear before them. Paul accepted their invitation. Even though he knew their motive was impure, that their way of life was wicked, and that this could bring him in great danger, he desired to preach. Paul accepted an invitation to preach in front of a woman whose father had killed the apostle James; whose great uncle, Herod Antipas, had killed John the Baptist; whose great grandfather, Herod the Great, had murdered all the babes of Bethlehem. He agreed to preach in that palace, formerly owned by Herod, where so many had been murdered. It was a saying of that day that there was not a stone of that building which had not been splattered with blood.

Paul went with unflinching courage, unwearied zeal, and unquenchable hope. He thought, "Perhaps Felix and Drusilla, despite their motives, will be savingly wrought upon by God." No doubt when he meditated of Felix, he thought to himself, "Felix too is a man, and does not the gospel say, 'Glory to God...and on earth peace, good will toward *men*'?" *Men* are pricked in heart by the gospel. Moreover, Felix was a Roman, and Paul felt a special burden for preaching also to the Romans. Perhaps this heathen was also lying under the seal of election. Moreover, Felix was a governor and had not Paul, at the time he was converted, received as a calling through the mouth of Ananias, "Go thy way: for he (Saul) is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and *kings*?" Oh, Paul thought, "Maybe this king shall now bow in the dust of self-abasement before the Lord; maybe

the Lord will use His Word to dethrone the self-enthroned Felix.” But above all, I think Paul reasoned, “Felix is a deeply fallen sinner just like I am, like I was, and like I remain in myself. If it was possible for the Lord to stop me on the way to Damascus as a persecutor, is it not possible for the Lord to stop Felix?” It was this in particular that motivated Paul with an unquenchable hope.

You and I are always figuring. We have our expectations of whom we think is going to be converted and of whom we think is not going to be converted. My friends, that is all senseless. The Lord is able to convert the hardest of hearts. If the Lord converts us, then we will feel something of a burden for souls and of an unquenchable hope. Wherever the Word comes, there is the possibility that it may be the hour in which God may work savingly in the hardest heart and the most unlikely human choice. Do you understand now why Paul couldn’t decline this dangerous invitation?

This affords us two applications: First, perhaps there are those among us who fear God will never work in their hearts. You view yourself as an unlikely choice. Oh, my dear friend, God delights to choose the unlikely! Contrary to Eve’s expectation, He chose Abel and not Cain. He chose Israel, a small nation, and not the world powers. There is hope for those who feel they are unworthy, unlikely choices.

Secondly, do you and I possess such an evangelistic heart as the apostle Paul? Would we be willing to bring the gospel to those who might endanger our lives?

With holy boldness Paul “reasoned” with them. He had three points to his sermon—righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come. He used each of these points like a barb to pierce the hearts of Felix and Drusilla. He had one great goal: that the Lord might bless His Word to the saving conviction of this ungodly couple.

“He reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come.” Paul’s first point was *righteousness*—a point most appropriate for Felix who was called to be a righteous judge. Can you not almost hear Paul reasoning

with Felix about righteousness in this way: “God is righteous, Felix. He is the just One. He created us righteous and holy. He demands that we too be righteous despite our deep fall in Adam. We have lost that original righteousness. We have plunged ourselves into sin. It is not Adam’s fault, but our fault that we reveal daily our unrighteous natures. Look at your hands, Felix. Are they not full of bribery? Look at your feet, Felix. Are they not quick to shed blood? Look at your heart, Felix. Is it not full of injustice? Look at your life, Felix. Is it not filled with cruelty? Felix, you must become righteous before God. That is impossible with man but it is possible with God. There is a way of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ who has paid the full price of sin on behalf of needy sinners such as we are, though He Himself was fully righteous. He did this, Felix, in order to satisfy God’s justice as a substitute for unrighteous sinners, so that they might know His righteousness. Felix, there is a way of salvation for unrighteous, cruel, bribing sinners such as you, who are not motivated by principles of righteousness, but who guide their lives by principles of unrighteousness. Felix, how do you stand before the righteousness of God?”

His second point was *temperance*. Temperance means *self-control; freedom from that which defiles; personal purity*. Temperance means to *have one’s passions under control*. Now the sword became even more pointed. “Felix, are you not an adulterer, an unchaste, unclean person? Is not that young woman beside you an adulteress? Are you not living in shameless lust in an unbiblical marriage? Felix, how shall you meet a pure and holy God when you are impure and unholy?”

Thirdly, he preached of *judgment to come*. I can see in my mind’s eye Paul coming to the climax of his sermon, reasoning from righteousness and temperance to judgment. “Felix, you are guilty with regard to righteousness and temperance. But you are also guilty with regard to judgment to come. That judgment shall be *inevitable*. The Judge stands at the door. It shall be a *personal* judgment. Every sin shall be accounted for. Nothing shall be hidden

from the omniscient eye of God. All the books of our lives shall be opened. And it is an *eternal* judgment. Of that judgment there is no return. We shall enter everlasting joy or everlasting torment, the glory of heaven or the tragedy of hell. Felix, you are a judge, but this Judge does not operate as you do. This Judge takes no bribes on the great day of days. This Judge offers no parole. This Judge is straightforward. He is just in His justice. The sentence He pronounces is strictly executed. Felix, how shall you stand before a holy and righteous God? Your future, Felix, if you do not repent, shall be everlasting condemnation. Hell is a place, Felix, where its inhabitants are ever being consumed and yet never fully consumed, ever dying but never dead, ever burning but never burned up. Hell is a place where there is no communion, no friendship—yes, nothing but the wrath of God poured out without mixture. Felix, how shall you stand? Felix, you need the Lord Jesus Christ as your only hope.”

Dear friends, we are called to reason similarly with ourselves, each other, and our neighbor. Though you and I may not have been as notoriously wicked as Felix, the same principles hold true. How can we pass the tests of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come without His Son? We need the Lord Jesus Christ as the only answer for our sins; otherwise everyone of us will perish in hell, condemned eternally with no relief. By nature we don't want to hear this solemn warning. We don't want to face the solemn reality that hell and condemnation will be our portion if we are not brought under saving conviction, if we are not driven unto the Lord Jesus Christ to find in Him everything we need. My friends, I yearn to reason with you too of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come: How shall you stand before God without His dear Son? You can't meet Him without the blood of Christ. How can you live on unprepared? How can you travel to a certain eternity without seeking the application of the blood of Christ? Common sense tells us that we are fools when we don't seek the Lord. “Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give

thee light.” Don’t delay. Make haste for your life’s sake. You need to be born again. You need a living, real, personal relationship with the almighty God in the face of His dear Son.

Felix and Drusilla heard the Word of God. Drusilla responded indifferently. We don’t read one word of what happened to Drusilla. We fear that this young woman had nearly seared her conscience already at seventeen years of age. She remained unmoved and unashamed under Paul’s searching sermon. Oh, what a solemn thing! Paul powerfully used the two-edged sword of law and gospel, but Drusilla was moved neither by the threatenings of the law nor by the sweet tenors of the gospel. She sat as a stone. Law nor gospel produced any guilt.

My friends, we could not ask for a greater punishment in this world than to be abandoned to the hardness of our own hearts. Oh, what a dreadful thing to be left over to ourselves! Then the Lord says of us, “I will strive no more with this sinner forever!”

It was different with Felix. Felix, our text says, not only *heard*, but *trembled*. The Greek word for “trembled” corresponds to the Hebrew word used in Daniel about Belshazzar when his knees smote together out of fear. Felix trembled so much that it became visible physically. How severe it was we don’t know, but we do know that he received an open conscience. He felt that everything Paul said was true. He *was* unrighteous; he *was* intemperate; he was *not* ready to meet God. He *was* traveling to eternity unprepared for the judgment to come.

As Felix sat on his throne chair, it was as if he saw God’s white throne displayed, as if he were standing before the Lord of hosts as holy Judge. It was as if the books were opened as Paul was preaching; Felix saw that every page of his life was stained with guilt. It became true for him: “I, who am accustomed to self-indulgence and to pleasure, shall soon become the victim of a worm that dies not and of a fire that is not quenched. I, who have treated so many others unjustly, shall soon be justly judged to eternal torment.”

Felix trembled. He was terrified. His knees smote together. His conscience spoke, "Thou art the man." Despite political power, he could not shield his soul from being filled with fear.

Felix trembled. He was placed before eternity, before the great Judge of the heavens and the earth. It was as if Paul brought his whole life into the open, exposing his lustful indulgences, briberies, frauds, and cruelties. To some degree Felix could say, "Truly, here is a man that told me all things that ever I did" (cf. John 4:29a). He was standing with an open conscience before an open Judge and an open eternity. He was standing on the border of eternal well and eternal woe. His conscience was speaking, "Felix, Felix, repent, repent! Are you not only treasuring and heaping up wrath against the day of wrath?"

On the borders of eternity, Felix had one more opportunity to bow before the Lord! There that poor, elderly man sat with an open conscience, restless, shifting his position on his throne, hardly able to remain sitting because it was all so true. Temperance, righteousness, judgment to come—each of Paul's three sermon points condemned him. The Lord gave him one more opportunity to beg for mercy. Jesus of Nazareth was passing by one more time, testifying as it were: "Oh, Felix, will you not cry out like Bartimaeus, 'Son of David, have mercy on me'? Felix, will you not give up the battle? Felix, will you not bow before the Lord while you still have opportunity? Felix, bow and confess! You are already old. It could be the last time you have to hear the Word of God. Bow, Felix, bow!"

Oh, boys and girls, if we had been there would not we also have urged him to bow? "Felix," we would say, "don't ruin for yourself the rest of your life and all of eternity. Here you are placed before a very solemn opportunity where the Lord Himself in the person of Paul invites you to repent."

My friends, you and I are in the same position. Whether we are boys or girls, teenagers, young men or women, parents or grandparents, the Holy Spirit calls to us through the Word, "Bow, sinner. Repent, before it is

forever too late.” Under the preaching of the Word of God, we are brought to the borders of everlasting well and everlasting woe. The Word of God reasons also with us of temperance, righteousness, and judgment to come. What shall you answer today? What have you answered all your lifetime? What shall Felix answer? With an open conscience, shifting uncomfortably upon his throne, Felix spoke most tragically: “Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.” He rejected the Word and the invitation of the living God. That solemn rejection we will consider after we sing first from Psalter 265, stanzas 1 and 2.

Paul preached; Felix trembled. Paul was at the judgment bar; Felix, on the judgment seat. But in their consciences the positions were reversed. Paul was the free man; Felix, the prisoner. The prisoner became the judge; the prince on the throne became the criminal. The ruler of the country trembled before a tent-maker. That’s the power of the Word of God.

My friends, that Word comes to you with power also. I thank God that we do not have many Drusillas. I hope there are none. I hope we still have an open conscience. But it is critical what we do with that open conscience. When we hear the Word of God, do we reject it? Do we respond like Felix?

Felix’s solemn rejection of Paul’s word has at least four important lessons to teach us. The first is this: If the Word is not an applied Word for us by grace, it is a rejected Word. It is one or the other. The Word can never leave us “in-between.” We never leave God’s house as we have come because the Word of God always does something. We can never remain neutral under the Word. The Word either hardens us or humbles us.

Dear friend, every time you stifle your conscience, you stifle convictions; every time you neglect an opportunity, you are left in a worse and more hopeless condition than you were in before the Word came to you in the house of God. That is a serious thing; the Lord is not to be mocked. When the Lord speaks His Word, He is coming with a

heaven-sent invitation addressed to you to repent and turn to Him before it is forever too late. The Lord wants us, as the Puritans would say, to make “use” of the convictions of our conscience by turning those convictions into petitions. But when we pluck from our breasts the very convictions we feel, push away the Word of God, and say, “I cannot be converted,” or, “I will not be converted,” and leave church to return to the world, then we give ourselves over to further hardening. It is a tragic thing to disregard God’s holy, sincere invitations to turn to Him for mercy. “He, that being often reprov’d hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.” That’s the future of Felix and such of his mentality.

The second important lesson we have to learn from Felix’s rejection is the grave danger of delay with regard to our never-dying souls. Felix said as it were, “Go thy way; I will call for you again, Paul.” But he never called again. It was probably the last time that Felix heard the Word of God.

Moreover, Felix was not only sending Paul away by saying, “Go thy way,” but in essence was sending away Him who sent Paul, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was but the ambassador of the Lord of lords. In essence, Felix was saying, “Go away, Lord. When I have a convenient season, I will call for Thee.” But the Lord cut off that way, saying as it were: “Felix, you have cut off My Word. I will cut off My Word from you.” When we reject God’s Word repeatedly, my friends, should we be surprised that the Lord finally rejects us? When we repeatedly stand before an open door in which the Lord invites us to bow and repent, be not surprised when the Lord finally closes the door of His invitations if we constantly use excuses of inability or unwillingness. We shall not be able to postpone the great day of God’s visitation. In that day all our excuses will be as nothing before the sight of a holy and righteous God. We think we are doing nothing, but are mistaken. Rejecting the Word of God is saying “no” to the Lord, and there will come a day when the Lord will say “no” to you if you keep saying “no” to Him year in, year out. His pa-

tience is not to be mocked. There comes an end. The danger of delay is very great. Felix was saying “farewell” to God. He was deliberately destroying himself. Felix was choosing the easy way out for flesh and blood for the moment, but it was ultimately the choice we all make by nature, namely, the choice of hell and condemnation.

All the while Felix was deceiving himself, too. He said as it were, “Tomorrow I will seek. I will respond when I have a convenient season.” Martin Luther said, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” There are two words that have slain numerous souls—the word “yesterday” and the word “tomorrow.” *The word “yesterday” has slain its thousands.* There are thousands who say, “Why should I seek the Lord? I have sinned too much in my past. All my ‘yesterdays’ testify against me. I have done nothing worthy of God’s merciful attention.” Such reasoning sounds pious, but is straight from hell. The Lord invites you *today*: “Sinner, repent.” Anything you use of your past life to assert, “The Lord cannot have mercy on me,” is simply wrong and is only a technique to avoid a real search for God. The Lord says, “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin,” and what have you done in any one of your “yesterdays” to get beyond the words, “all sin”? My friends, ultimately it is not your “yesterdays” that keep you from the Lord, but your *unwillingness* today to lose your life and bow before Him.

But whereas yesterday has slain its thousands, *the word “tomorrow” has slain its tens of thousands.* “Tomorrow I will seek Him.” Maybe this very day you will leave this house of prayer saying, “Yes, I need to be converted, and I will begin seeking Him tomorrow.” Tomorrow is too late! Tomorrow’s faith is today’s unbelief. “Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart.” “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” You never read once in Scripture about seeking the Lord tomorrow. Seek Him today. Seek Him this very hour. Ask Him for grace to show you that you are no different from Felix. Though the notoriety of your sins may be less, the essence of your sin is the same.

Pray to Him today, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. I need to be born again."

You can't afford to delay anymore, my friends. You think you can afford time for lawful entertainment, for friendships, for legitimate reading. You find time for all kinds of lawful things, do you not? But will you let pass by the one thing you really need? How are you spending your time? You need more than outward impressions. You need to bow. It is not enough to come to church and hear a sermon that warns you admonishingly. You need the essence of true religion. Do not rest until you know the Lord savingly, until you lose your own life and find it in Him, until you may know the Spirit-worked marks and steps of grace. We need these things! We will miss the whole purpose of our life if we go to eternity without them.

There is a third lesson we must glean from Felix's rejection: *the danger of resting in common convictions*. Felix pacified his conscience for the time being with his impressions. He rested in his common convictions, in his slavish fear of God, in his speaking conscience, but was missing the essential, born-again, childlike fear of God. That's a great danger. Herod rejoiced, Felix trembled, Orpah and Esau wept, Ahab mourned, Saul confessed, Balaam desired to die the death of the righteous, the five foolish virgins all waited for the bridegroom, but they all went to hell. They were resting in their common convictions, resting in slavish fear.

What is the difference between slavish fear and childlike fear? Slavish fear has its roots in the covenant of works; childlike fear, in the covenant of grace. Slavish fear is provoked by the consequences of sin; childlike fear, by the God-dishonoring character of sin. Slavish fear is motivated by legalistic servitude, looking for reward; childlike fear is motivated by voluntary obedience, looking for grace. In slavish fear, the enmity of our heart is not broken; in childlike fear, this enmity is broken. In slavish fear we have hard thoughts of God; in childlike fear we have high thoughts of God. Slavish fear hates punishment; childlike fear hates sin. Slavish fear seeks

for self-preservation and self-honor; childlike fear seeks the preservation of the Lord's attributes and honor. Slavish fear produces a convinced sinner; childlike fear, a truly convicted, converted sinner. Slavish fear looks for relief; childlike fear looks for welfare above relief.

Slavish fear is of a temporary character. "It is," as John Warburton said, "religion in fits and starts. It comes and goes." Childlike fear is more steady; it abides more deeply; it grows more profoundly in the soil of the heart. Slavish fear ultimately returns to the world. It clings to sin and is choked by the world. Childlike fear cannot return to the world; it parts from sin, and longs to be with God. Slavish fear never truly humbles the sinner as an unworthy sinner; childlike fear humbles the sinner as the chiefest of transgressors. Slavish fear leaves the eye closed to Christ; childlike fear has its eye fixed upon Christ.

Slavish fear has its own glory as its ultimate goal; it desires only a quieted conscience, peace and rest. Childlike fear aims for the glory of God; true rest in God is its lofty goal. Slavish fear ends in damnation; childlike fear ends in salvation. Which kind of fear do we possess, my friends, slavish or childlike?

The last lesson we wish to consider from Felix's tragic rejection of the Word is that the end of a life of sin shall be terrible. Felix and Drusilla had one son. Drusilla and that son died three years after hearing Paul preach, when a volcano erupted, destroying two large cities. Felix was spared but soon became insane. Josephus tells us that he whose name, "Felix," in Greek means "happy," became terribly unhappy. Some years later Felix committed suicide in the mountains of Italy. It was a tragic end to a tragic life, but it was a life that had rejected a golden opportunity.

Oh my friends, value the opportunities that you receive to hear the Word of God, but do not rest in those opportunities alone. You need Spirit-worked application. Shall you end well, you must be brought into personal, saving communion with the Lord in this life. Delay not. Call upon Him while He is yet to be found. Seek Him while He is yet near. Soon it will be too late to call upon the Lord.

The story is told of an agnostic who said to his friends gathered around his deathbed, "Now I know there is a God, a God before whom I shall appear, a God whom I have tried to deny my whole life. But now it is too late, for I see Him coming, not as a God of mercy, but as a God of judgment, holiness, and wrath."

Dear congregation, the Lord says, "I have called and ye have refused. I have stretched out My hands and no man has regarded." Will that take place again today? Will this very message come back in eternity, and will you see yourself again sitting here on this particular day under this particular message and realize that you have passed by a golden opportunity just like Felix? Shall this very sermon add to your condemnation? Shall you say, "There I was, sitting in that particular bench, in that particular seat, and I heard the invitation that God said also to me, 'Turn, turn, for why will ye die?' But I pushed it away; I rejected the Word of God and I said, 'Lord, tomorrow; go Thy way, and I will call for Thee when a convenient season comes.'"

Oh my friends, our natural hearts never have a convenient season! Seek bowing grace before it is forever too late. Pray for grace to pray against yourself. Take this serious admonition, lay it before the Lord and pray, "Lord, conquer my heart against my will. I cannot go on without Thee. Let me not be a Felix, but let me be a crying, begging Bartimaeus."

Finally, dear children of God, what a blessing that when you said, "Go away," the Lord became too strong for you. How shall you ever fathom the power of God, His Word, and His grace? None of us is inherently better than Felix, but God makes a difference where there is no difference. "Thou art, O God, our boast, the glory of our power; Thy sovereign grace is e'er our fortress and our tower."

Let us all plead that He may make that difference for us. "Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many...will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

"Prepare to meet thy God." "Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live." AMEN.

Our Nation Laid in the Balances

National Prayer Day

Dr. J.R. Beeke

Psalter 218: 1, 2
Scripture: Jeremiah 9:1-16
Text: Jeremiah 9:9
Psalter 441
Psalter 4
America

Dear congregation, it is good that we have an opportunity to come together for an annual National Prayer Day service. Today we are called to consider the moral and spiritual fiber of our nation and of ourselves as citizens who either contribute to or detract from the well-being of our country. When we are called upon to examine our nation in the light of Scripture, we shall find, as you well know, that as a people we are laid in the balances and found wanting. Moreover, we have to bear in mind that we are not mere spectators looking upon this nation. Every sin which cripples this land has its beginning in our natural, corrupt, fallen hearts. We are involved; we are part of the problem. And only by grace can we ever be a part of the solution.

Our nation is at a critical juncture. We are on the verge of spiritual, moral, and financial collapse. Only the intervening grace of God can help us and deliver us, and so we turn to the living God as our only hope. We want to consider not only the plague that is upon us, but also the only cure of that dreadful plague. Our text words are Jeremiah 9:9, “*Shall I not visit them for these things? saith the LORD: shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?*”

With God’s help we will consider *Our Nation, the United States of America, Laid in the Balances*. We will see:

1. The sad condition of our nation
2. The impending judgment upon our nation
3. The only hope for our nation.

1. The Sad Condition of our Nation

In English grammar there is such a thing that we call a *rhetorical question*. A rhetorical question is a question you ask that does not really need an answer because the question itself implies the answer. Our text is a rhetorical question. Jeremiah has listed in eight or nine verses the great and gross sins of the people of Israel. The conclusion can only be judgment if there is no national repentance. And so when the Lord asks this question in our text, we do not have to wonder what the answer is. The answer is in the question: "Shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?"

God says as it were "This nation—the nation that I have delivered from Egypt with an outstretched arm; the nation for whom I have divided the Red Sea and led them through the wilderness by a cloud and a pillar of fire; this nation that I fed with manna and gave water from a rock to drink, and planted in a good land; this nation that has often rebelled and I have been merciful again and again to them; this nation which is now worshipping Baalim—shall I not be avenged upon such a nation as this?"

God fulfilled this rhetorical question. Israel did not listen to Jeremiah. She filled her cup of iniquity and God sent Nebuchadnezzar to conquer the land, to destroy the temple and city of Jerusalem. The temple was burned, the land was desolated, and the majority of the citizens were killed. Survivors were led as captives to a distant land. God was avenged of such a nation as this.

We have to consider, congregation, that the parallels that our nation has with Old Testament Israel are both striking and disturbing. We are also a highly favored nation. Even today we are the envy of most nations but like Israel we are a sinful, ungrateful, immoral people in the midst of prosperity. We are an ungodly people despite the godly roots our forefathers have established when they landed on the shores of this nation. They wrote in their well-known *Mayflower Pact*: "The primary purpose of settling in this new land is for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith." Ought not we be filled

with both sorrow and joy today—joy that we had such a rich beginning; sorrow over where we are now at? Today we have judges who have decided that the ten commandments cannot be placed on the classroom walls of a public school because some children might be offended by their contents. We have given in to pluralism; we have surrendered our Christian moorings so that most historians now speak of our age as post-Christian America.

Things have gone from bad to worse. Our beginnings were good. Godly laymen like John Winthrop, as well as godly preachers like Thomas Shepard, Thomas Hooker, John Cotton, Peter Bulkeley, and Thomas Cobbett had great impact on the morality of the people. It was not long, however, before the so-called Enlightenment blew over from France and took deep root in this land. It espoused the child of humanism; humanism in turn fostered pluralism and pragmatism, such that God and His law and Word are excluded from the classroom and the courtroom.

Today we have the full outgrowth of secular humanism. Morality is at an all time low. I read only yesterday that sixty-two percent of children born to black women are illegitimate. Thirty years ago it was twenty-one percent. It has tripled in thirty years. But the same article said that thirty years ago among white women illegitimacy was at seven percent, but today it is at twenty-one percent—also a triple jump. Among whites it is exactly where it was at thirty years ago among blacks. If immorality continues to proceed at this pace, the majority of children born in this country will be born illegitimately.

Financially, our nation is a disaster. We are 4.6 trillion dollars in debt, which amounts to eighteen thousand dollars for every person in our nation. There are 4.6 billion people on the earth, and our nation alone owes 4.6 trillion dollars—one thousand dollars for every person on the face of the earth.

Spiritually, we are faring no better. A few weeks ago, when I was flying out to Iowa, I happened to sit next to a minister who is involved in Reformed radio ministry. He

told me that there were 16,000 “Christian” radio stations in North America, of which less than one hundred ever present anything which resembles the Reformed, Calvinistic faith. The vast majority of them proclaim largely one form of Arminianism or another. So this nation is being inundated with Arminianism—man can accept Jesus; man has a free will. Arminianism was practically foreign to our soil until the 1820s, when Charles Finney happened upon the scene and developed a man-structured, man-organized revivalism. Since that day, America has no longer seen any major Spirit-filled revivals. The 1730s, 1740s, and the early 1800s, sometimes called the first and second awakenings, were the bright spots, but they all happened in the context of Calvinism, not Arminianism. The greatest missionaries of this land’s history and the greatest fruits upon preaching have been the result of solid, biblical, Calvinistic exposition, not Arminian exposition. And what does that say to us? Well, that says to us that there is a tremendous burden resting upon all of us; a tremendous responsibility to swim against the stream and to declare a God of sovereign grace. We desperately need biblical Calvinistic preachers in this land to proclaim to young and old through preaching, the printed word, and on radio, that God is the living God, that man is depraved, but that God is able and willing to save the greatest of sinners out of free and sovereign grace.

Materialism is at an all-time high. Covetousness is the mother of many sins in our nation. Pride and self-emulation abound; pride is encouraged. And what must we say of the heinous practice of *abortion*? Let us not grow hardened to the fact that we have killed with legal governmental sanction more than twenty five million unborn babies in the last generation—as much as the entire population of Canada! The consequences of this baby holocaust will come back to haunt us, if the Lord tarries. Soon there will be more older people who need help than we know how to cope with, and not enough young ones to care for them, and it will be our own fault. And yet we go on. God shouts with a megaphone through a variety of national judg-

ments, and yet we continue to rush headlong into sin. We have become a national Sodom and Gomorrah. We go on flirting with euthanasia. We go on blatantly in Sabbath desecration, pursuing our own desires on the Lord's day. In the last decade, for the first time in the history of America, the majority of our citizens no longer attend any church on a regular basis. God's Word is joked about, even among people who name the name of Christ. Swearing is a common everyday thing. Parental rights are increasingly denied. Worldliness—the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, the pride of life—abounds; worldly music, worldly parties, worldly friendships, and worldly reading material get worse. Our nation is worshipping at the shrine of organized sports. Some even in conservative Reformed circles get deeply involved in watching sports on television, perhaps never stopping to think these men are making millions of dollars; it is a fraud.

We have lost our sense of scriptural integrity. We submit to no authority. The means of grace are abandoned; religious duties are neglected; prayer is something done for a few minutes a day at best. Ninety-six percent of Americans today are convinced that they will not go to hell.

We are a nation just like Israel. We are living in the midst of deceit. We are deceiving ourselves financially, we are deceiving ourselves morally, we are deceiving ourselves spiritually. We are saying to ourselves, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace."

Where are the fathers who are busy instructing their children in the Scriptures? Where are the homes that engage in daily, conscientious family worship? Where are the people, even in our midst, who genuinely wrestle in the inner closet for our nation? So much is disappearing. Our own congregations have seen encouraging increases of spiritual life on the one hand, but discouraging developments on the other—discouraging when some take their Christianity so lightly, and do not live it out in daily life; discouraging when our talk and our dress and our walk do not reflect the sobriety with which God's Word calls us to walk through this Mesech here below; discour-

aging when some among us continue to persist in habitually involving themselves in various forms of entertainment in the media world.

Today Christianity by and large has baptized itself into materialism and humanism and “selfism.” Many do not come to church as a family any more. They do not grieve with those who grieve, nor rejoice with those who rejoice, but they come to church saying, “What’s in it for *me*?” There is little bearing of each others’ burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ. Christianity in America today is three thousand miles wide, fifteen hundred miles high, but only one inch deep. We are shallow, we are backslidden, and God can say of us as citizens of this nation: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up my children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel to anger, they are gone away backward. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart is faint” (Isa. 1:2-5).

2. Impending Judgment for our Nation

Decay is everywhere; we have forgotten the Lord God. Why should not the Lord be avenged on such a nation as ours? Is it not a rhetorical question? Is not the Lord already on His way with divine judgment? God’s patience will come to an end. Ecclesiastes 8:11 says, “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.” That is the picture of our nation, but it won’t be its picture much longer because we are destroying ourselves.

The pattern of nations almost always follows a five-step process. There is the *infancy* time where the nation bands together in organization; then there is the *growth* period; then the time of *maturity and prosperity*; then the

time of *decay*; and finally the time of *destruction*. That was the pattern of the world's mighty empires—Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome. Our nation appears to be at the end of the fourth step. We do not have to be prophets to say that; it is obvious. We are filled with decay, we are on the verge of destruction, and the Lord is asking in our text for us to lay before ourselves this question: “How shall I spare you, United States of America, for your sins? Would it be consistent with the nature and the glory of My Name and My government to spare such a nation? Do not the holiness of My nature, the honor of My government, the rectitude of My law, and the truth of My Word compel Me to destroy such a nation as this?” Ought not every mouth in the United States of America—yours and mine also—be stopped, and the whole country be united in declaring that God would be righteous and just to abandon us altogether, to destroy us as a people, to let all the crops rot in the field this year, and to let us have our financial, moral, and spiritual debts collapse upon our heads? We have asked for divine destruction.

Perhaps you ask: Is there then no hope? Not in this nation and not in us—only in the grace of God. And that is what we will consider in our last thought after we sing.

3. The Only Hope for our Nation

We have squandered our rich heritage, we have spoiled what our forebears have striven for, and now we must say in the words of Lamentations 5:16, “The crown is fallen from our head: woe unto us, that we have sinned!” We have turned our backs to God and clouds of darkness hang above us. Everything seems to be on the verge of collapse; the future seems to be hopeless. And if you look at our text, that is what you must think.

Is there then nothing in our text that gives any hope? Look again, congregation. “Shall I not visit them for these things? saith the LORD.” Notice that God uses His covenant name Yahweh, the special name of the living Jehovah who will remain faithful and true to His covenant. There is still hope. Our only hope is in the

name of the Almighty God, that God who still says to us as we are about to slip into destruction, “Only acknowledge your iniquities and turn back to the Lord your God for I will yet have mercy upon you.” I am convinced, congregation, that if this nation would cry mightily to God as we read in 2 Chronicles 7:14, repent of our sins, take upon ourselves moral and financial and spiritual responsibility, and beg for mercy, that this land could yet be restored to its greatness. It is our fault, but there is hope *in the Lord God*, in His covenant name, the LORD. There is hope if God visits us with covenantal judgments; there is hope if He visits us with covenantal mercies; there is hope as long as that covenant-keeping God does not stop dealing altogether with such a nation as we are. That is what God said to Israel in Deuteronomy, did He not? He said as it were: The greatest punishment that I can ever bring upon you as a people or as a nation is when I stop sending you both My mercies and My judgments, and leave you over to yourselves. The greatest judgment God can bring upon a nation is to stop visiting that nation. Will God stop visiting us altogether this year? Next year? Are His present judgments an open testimony that He is giving us one or two final calls to repent, and then He will let us be? “Turn ye, turn ye, O house of Israel—oh congregation, oh America—for why will ye die?”

Oh congregation, it is a serious thing to be a human being; a serious thing to have a soul; to have time on our hands; to be journeying to eternity—especially to be journeying to eternity without our sins having been washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. Oh my friend, if our sins are not washed away, I tremble to say it but I have to say it, then we are but adding to the large debt of national sin! Oh, I call to you in the name of God, repent, sinner, before the vengeance of God descends also upon you and your family. Hear the call of God before it is too late. Ye must be born again!

But there is hope! Hope for the unsaved? Yes. In what? In God, in the overtures of His gospel grace, and in His open declarations that He is willing to save lost sin-

ners! It is not man's word that says, "Seek ye the Lord," but it is God's Word! God says, "Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him (not just God's people) while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him *return* unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." What we need today is national repentance; we need thousands upon thousands to bow in individual repentance in their own homes. We need fathers to call their children to repentance. We need mothers to bow in the dust in the presence of their children. We need husbands and wives to repent before God together in secret and individually. We need children to call out to God, "O God be merciful to me a sinner."

The solution to all our problems lies only in the God of grace granting true and godly repentance. Our duty is to get on our knees like Nineveh, to believe that the time is short and the judgment is ripe, and to put our hope in the Lord God. The prayers of God's people can only stay the hand of God so long. There came a time when there were not enough petitioners in Sodom and Gomorrah to keep back the judgment. And God said in Jeremiah 15:1, "Then said the LORD unto me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people: cast them out of my sight, and let them go forth." Is that day coming, when the Moseses and Samuels of this land, that is, those who are still interceding between the porch and the temple for Almighty God and for the glory of His Name in the midst of this nation, become so few and far between and the population so large that God would say, "I will not spare this nation any more"? Oh congregation, it is a National Day of Prayer. God calls us to pray to Him as the almighty, faithful, covenant-keeping God.

What must we then pray for? We must pray in the first place that God may send godly preachers, for not only does judgment begin at the house of God, but also revival begins at the house of God. Revival in church history always begins with those who fear the Lord being aroused

in their own spiritual life, and storming the kingdom of heaven and taking the kingdom of heaven by violence. That is the pattern of revival. Revival begins with the children of God, particularly with bold and courageous servants of God who dare to declare death in Adam and life in Christ, and the need for repentance. We need godly preachers. We need to pray for revival—revival of historic Calvinism. The books we sell and read are needed throughout this whole land. We need to get them out. We need to pray for open doors to reach the millions of the lost—those in our own families, in our own congregation, but also in our city, our state, our nation—with the message of the gospel. We need to pray for godly politicians, for godly business people, for godly educators, for godly doctors and nurses. We need to pray for missionaries, for mission workers, for evangelists—yes, for people who are willing to lay down their lives, to labor for the gospel's sake, to make a difference in this world in which so many are just padding their bank accounts and abandoning the spiritual needs of their fellow man. We need to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We need to pray for revival of experimental Calvinism—not only the outward shell of the doctrines but the inward living essence. We need to pray that sinners may experience sound and true conversions that may evidence the marks and fruits of grace which Scripture expounds.

We need to *pray*. Prayer is the *greatest weapon* at our disposal. "Prayer," said Octavius Winslow, "is the pulse of the renewed soul, and the constancy of its beat is the test and measure of spiritual life." As the poet William Cowper wrote:

*Restraining prayer we cease to fight;
Prayer makes the Christian's armour bright;
And Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.*

But we need more than prayer. The boat must be rowed with two oars—*prayer and work*: work, not in our own strength, but work that is mixed with prayer; work

under God, work in obedience to God. We do not have much to say about the way things are in our nation if we never sit down and write letters to our political leaders on the moral issues of the day. We do not have much to say as a citizen who contributes to this nation, do we, if we have never done anything in our local neighborhood to promote the gospel and biblical morality. We do not have much to say if we never speak about the one thing needful to those with whom we work; or have never given out any tracts or books.

Let me ask you this question: *What difference would it make in the world today if you were not here, and if I were not here?* How many people would not hear the gospel? How many people would not be lovingly—I stress *lovingly*—confronted with their sin? What difference would it make if you were not here? We must *work*. And work does not always mean *talking*; work also means *walking*, being examples. Congregation, do you realize that every one of us is being watched by the world? I had someone today say to me that they were “kind of interested” in coming to our church, but not yet convinced to come. I asked, “Why don’t you come?” And she said, “I cannot bring myself to do it yet; maybe some day.” I said, “Why not next week?” She said, “Because I cannot get over the impression that you are a church which doesn’t offer hope.” I said, “No hope! We preach, my dear friend, the only hope there is!” “Well,” she said, “but from what I have *seen*, I am not sure.” My heart began to bleed. *No hope!* She is wrong, of course, but what gave her that impression? What did she see, what did she hear? Oh my dear friend, we are a church that preaches no hope in man—for there is no hope in man and we have not to be embarrassed to preach that there is no hope in man—but God forbid that we preach that there is no hope in God! His Name is the LORD. All hope is in Him. His Name is Hope with a capital “H.” He is Hope—Christ is hope and hope is Christ; it is His core nature. But if we are silent about that hope, or worse yet are negative toward that hope, we bring a blight upon the cause of Jesus Christ.

Finally, let me say to you, dear child of God: To you belongs the future. Even in wars and rumors of wars, to you belongs the future. "And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet" (Mt. 24:6). Today the end is not yet, but ask God, dear believer, that the rest of your life may be wholly consecrated, whoever you may be, to God, for the cause and the sake of the gospel. Pray that God may make you useful; that He may bless you and let you be a blessing, because that is what this land desperately needs—children of God who do not belong to themselves but to the faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, and who lay down their lives in adversity and in prosperity for the glorious coming of the kingdom of God in the church and in the world.

May God have mercy and forgiveness upon us, you and me, and upon this land. "To us belongeth confusion of face. To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him" (Dan. 9:8-9). "Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence" (Isa. 64:1). AMEN.