

The Power of the Gospel

PRAY.

His name was Freick and those who didn't hate him were scared of him. Out of the back room this notorious South African gangster dealt some drugs, but his main enterprises were a brothel and a gambling ring—both well known to the local authorities. But no one had the backbone to stand up to him.

A few years ago, a childhood friend invited him along on a group hunting trip, because Freick loved to hunt. What he didn't know was that the other men were all Christians and that he was the main quarry. Over the next 2 days in the African bush he both heard and saw the gospel. It penetrated his heart and he was born again.

He immediately closed down his criminal enterprises, made restitution everywhere he could, and within a few months began a prison ministry. Freick now preaches Christ to the same gangsters in prison that he, himself, used to steal from. With them he has great credibility concluding, "If this gospel can change Freick, it must be the real thing!" The power of the gospel is the power of God.

Romans 1:16 says, *...I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...*

The gospel is power. Not just a way of life, or a system of belief, the gospel is power. That's why people like Freick change when they surrender to Christ. It's why a woman held captive by bitterness for 2 decades, can forgive a man who stole her innocence at 7. It's why people who had spent their lives building bigger houses and portfolios, suddenly start giving some of it away. It's why people who lived just for themselves suddenly begin to live for the Lord and others. It's even why some of the people who *don't* come to faith, are still disturbed by hearing it. This gospel changed me; changed many of you. It can change you too. READ Acts 24:1-26.

Story

You'll remember from last Sunday that Roman soldiers snuck Paul out of Jerusalem under cover of darkness. Assassins had plotted to kill Paul there and the garrison commander also wanted the procurator Felix to examine Paul.

The high priest Ananias should have been ashamed to show his face in the court because he was a co-conspirator in the assassination plot. Nevertheless, his lawyer and other prominent Sanhedrin members joined him at Caesarea to attack Paul in court. After flattering the judge, the attorney listed the charges...:

1. Is a troublemaker causing riots
2. Is a ringleader of Christians (Nazarene sect)
3. Tried to desecrate the Jewish temple in Jerusalem

2 of the 3 were lies. There *was* a riot, but the *Jews* started it. And it began because someone *claimed* he had desecrated the temple—but he hadn't. Still, Ananias' backers all agreed, "Yes, these things are true.

Paul stood for his defense, "These charges are mostly false. Less than 2 weeks ago I arrived in Jerusalem to deliver gifts for the poor, to worship at the temple and bring offerings. I was ceremonially clean, and didn't create a disturbance anywhere. I *do* admit that I believe in everything written in the OT, and yes, though I'm a Christian worship the same God as these Jews and believe that the dead will all rise one day. So, I strive to keep short accounts with God."

The people who started this were out-of-town Jews. People from Asia who had clashed with Paul in their home towns and neighboring cities, over his ministry. When they came to Jerusalem for Passover, they spotted him on the streets with a man they knew was a Gentile. And for some strange reason, concluded he must have accompanied Paul to prohibited areas of the temple.

Yet, now these agitators and accusers were missing. "Where are the Jews from Asia who started all this? What charges do *they* bring? What do the *Sandhedrin* members have against me—unless perhaps it's my belief that the dead will rise?"

Prosecution finished, defense finished. Judge weighing if there was enough evidence to convict. But behind the veil of these court proceedings, there were spiritual proceedings. Beyond the power of the court, there was the power of the Holy Spirit working on a man's heart.

Although announcing he would wait until Commander Claudius Lysias arrived with his side of the story before deciding Paul's fate, Felix already had that testimony in the commander's letter. 2 other motives lay behind Felix's delay; one small, one big.

Small: a bribe.

Big: Fear. Despite believing Paul innocent, Felix was reluctant to alienate Jewish leaders (see v.27).

The fascinating part of this story is in vv.24-25. When the hearing was over, Paul was remanded to custody of a very loose kind, but then the Governor and his wife Drusilla invited him to a private audience. Perhaps Felix' wife sparked his interest for she was Jewish. Not exactly a practicing one. At just 19 years of age, she was already on her second marriage. Her brother had married her off to a minor Syrian king when she was 14. By 16 she'd tired of him and dumped him for this brutal man of power.

As they listened to this missionary, Felix grew nervous. READ vv.24-25. Sermon topics included righteousness, self-control, judgment. Why did they strike fear into Felix? *...because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.* (1 Thess.1:5)

To our knowledge, Felix never came to Christ. Jewish historian Josephus said that as governor, he "suppressed the murderers and robbers that infested Judea, yet he himself was more hurtful than them all." He put out a contract on the high priest Jonathan who was killed in the city square by assassins. Roman historian

Tacitus blamed Felix' harshness for planting the seeds of the Jewish revolt against Rome that began perhaps 9 years after this. Revolts against his rule were so common that Nero finally removed him in AD 58.

But if he eventually came to Christ in obscurity, or never did, this is certain: the power of the gospel afflicted him when Paul spoke to him. For "righteousness" was a stranger to him. As was self-control; he did as he pleased. And judgment was what he inflicted on *others*; not what he was prepared to be subjected to by an almighty God.

Friend, if you are not a Christian, let me tell you a few things about this good news, this gospel, and its power. First, people admire the persuasive power of great preachers and evangelists like Billy Graham or Bill Hybels or D.L. Moody. But all of them would be quick to say that when a sinner came to repentance and faith, it was the power of the gospel at work, not just speaking ability. According to 2 Cor.10:10, Paul was an unimpressive speaker. And yet when he spoke the gospel, Felix trembled. Why? God's power. READ Jn.16:8-9.

Secondly, on the day you become a Christian—and it is my fervent prayer that you will—it will not be because of some great intellectual prowess on your part, having grasped this new belief system. READ Eph.2:1-5. *God's* power brings your dead heart to life, regenerates you.

And thirdly, after you become a Christian, it will not be because you have great willpower or rigid self-denial that will stop you from doing the wrong you've always done, and do the right that's so unfamiliar. It's gospel power.

Without the power of the gospel, we are *slaves* to sin. READ Rom.6:22. God sets us free from the handcuffs of sin. Upon conversion, the Holy Spirit moves in and from the inside out, helps you do what you could not do on your own. READ Heb.10:14. We call this sanctification; how God's power makes us holy.

Concl:

Maybe you didn't understand much of what I said this morning. At least get this: God wants you. [Quote 2 Pet.3:9]. And He's exerting His power to get you. The very fact that you are here suggests that His power is already at work in you. What's been happening in your soul? Are you disinterested, angry, rebellious, fearful like Felix was? What's stopping you from saying "yes" except your own stubbornness, your devotion to your own ways? Won't you stop fighting Him and surrender? He won't leave you on your own. He won't ask anything of you that he doesn't empower you to do; nothing.

2 Cor.6:2 says *I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.* [Invitation]