

# Opportunities Wasted

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James

Acts 24:22-27

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

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**T** rue confession—I didn't go to church last Sunday. Instead, Chris and I watched our daughter, Emily, run the Marine Corps Marathon. At o-dark thirty, when ordinarily I would be putting finishing touches on my sermon, we boarded a train bound for the Pentagon. It was standing room only on the Orange line last Sunday morning at 6 am. When the doors of the blue line opened, we were engulfed by 33,000 runners and hundreds of thousands of spectators.

Over the next four hours, we caught a few fleeting glimpses of Emily. Do you know how hard it is to identify a single person out of a crowd of 33,000?

We met up with our daughter at a charity tent following the race. After a few photo ops, we attempted to board the train at Rosslyn. Everybody else had the same idea. So, we hiked to the Courthouse Station stop and crammed into the next train, arriving back in Vienna at 4 pm. I didn't run the race, but I was exhausted. I told my daughter that preaching a sermon three times is a walk in the park compared to what we experienced last Sunday.

My absence from church enabled me to see the hordes of people not in church last Sunday. Admittedly, I live in a bubble. My world is this church—I'm here six

days a week and services every Sunday. Yet, travel a block from this church, and you will find countless people who never darken the door of any church. Untold numbers of people are oblivious to what we do here.

Running or even watching the Marine Corps marathon is not for the faint of heart. We endured early morning reveille, mass transportation stretched to the breaking point, a sea of humanity and waiting in line to use the port-o-potty. Isn't it telling what Herculean efforts people will make to run 26.2 miles; yet some of the same people will not so much as lift a finger to love and serve God?

We have only one life to live, yet some of us invest our whole lives in watching games and weekend get-aways. Life presents us with untold opportunities to love and serve God, yet we are content to live out our days letting such opportunities pass unnoticed.

Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning captures this sentiment well:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush aflame  
with God.  
But only he who sees takes off  
his shoes;  
The rest sit round it and pluck  
blackberries.

***Earth is crammed with heaven, but only those who take off their shoes, recognize holy ground and see God.***

Her lament takes us back to the spellbinding encounter with Moses and the burning bush. Some people see the common bush and the blackberries, but miss the fire and presence of God. Earth is crammed with heaven, but only those who take off their shoes recognize holy ground and see God.

Today's Scripture lesson tells a tragic tale of a man presented with an opportunity to know and love God but lets the opportunity slip through his fingers. We've been reading in Acts about Paul's arrest in Jerusalem. Paul has been called on the carpet for preaching the good news about Jesus Christ. Paul is tried before the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews, as well as a Roman court, presided over by Antonio Felix, the governor of Judea.

A prosecuting attorney named Tertullus, hired by the Sanhedrin, begins his prosecution with the time-honored technique of schmoozing the governor: "Your Excellency, we have enjoyed a long period of peace under you and reforms have been made for the people because of your foresight" (24:2-3). This is flattery stretched to the breaking point. Felix has a well-earned reputation for being a tyrant. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, speaks of Felix as an oppressive ruler. His brutality so infuriates the Jews that they have him removed from office two years later. To use modern parlance, we would say Tertullus is a "suck up."

Tertullus knows Felix has no interest in being pulled into a theological tug-of-war between orthodox Jews and followers of the Way, so he begins his prosecution by accusing Paul of sedition: "We have found this man a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world" (24:5). He goes on to charge Paul with sectarianism: "A ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (24:5) and sacrilege: "He even tried to profane the temple" (24:6).

Paul serves as his own defense attorney in verses 10-21. His opening remarks are far more restrained than the bombast of Tertullus: "I cheerfully make my defense, knowing that for many years you have been judge over this nation" (24:10). Paul simply acknowledges Felix has been the governor for years—six to be exact—and could therefore be counted on to render a fair verdict.

Paul regards the charge of sedition as bogus. Paul has only been in Jerusalem for 12 days, hardly enough time to stir up any trouble (24:11-12). Paul announces to Felix, in verse 17, that he was on a mercy mission to deliver a collection of money raised by Gentile Christians to support Jewish Christians.

Paul claims to worship "the God of our ancestors" (24:14). His belief in the resurrection (24:16, 21) is not inconsistent with Judaism, since the religious order of the Pharisees also believed in a resurrection after death. Paul cannot resist the little dig that if his accusers have anything to say against him, they ought to be there in person to speak their minds (24:19). In a Roman court of

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law, if someone's accusers were no-shows, the charges were dropped.

Felix essentially takes a pass on trying Paul's case. He offers the lame excuse of wanting to hear from Lysias, who has already provided a written synopsis of Paul's case in the previous chapter (23:26-30). Felix is simply stalling for more time when he places Paul under house arrest.

Felix sends for Paul a few days later, with his wife Drusilla at his side (24:24). Drusilla is the sister of King Agrippa II, a ravishingly beautiful 20-year-old. According to Josephus, Felix had successfully lured Drusilla away from her previous husband and taken her as his third wife.

Paul speaks to the governor and his trophy wife about "justice, self-control and the coming judgment" (24:25). "Justice" would clarify Felix's acts of cruelty, "self-control" would reference Felix's unbridled passion and the "coming judgment" would speak to God holding Felix accountable for his actions. When Paul's speech becomes personal, Felix turns dismissive: "Go away for the present; when I have opportunity I will send for you." When Felix does send for Paul, it is in hopes that Paul will bribe the governor for his freedom (24:26).

This story is one of the most tragic examples of missed opportunities in Scripture. The only other story that rivals it is Judas, who peddles away friendship with Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Felix has Paul at his disposal for two

years. But he lets the years pass, and the opportunity is lost forever.

It's called procrastination. The word "procrastination" comes from the Latin prefix "pro," meaning "in favor of" and the Latin root "cras" for "tomorrow." It's putting off today in favor of tomorrow. Mark Twain said, "Never put off until tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow." The Protestant reformer Martin Luther, in his commentary on Acts 24, writes "How soon 'not now' becomes 'never.'" Procrastinators have a history of not making decisions, not dealing with issues, not having necessary conversations, not addressing problems or being honest with themselves.

I'll get serious about God and Jesus when I finish high school or graduate from college. I'll take faith seriously when I marry and settle down. I'll become a Christ follower when my kids are grown and out of the nest. I'll serve Christ when I retire and have more time. There's always some excuse why today is wasted in favor of tomorrow.

Decide today, right here and right now, to become serious about making God a bigger priority in your life. Here's the catch: we want God on our terms. God, you can have my Sunday morning two Sundays out of four. A relationship with God, like any other relationship, takes time.

You may be saying under your breath this is all well and good, but I don't have the time. Yes, you do! I'll tell you how you can immediately find more time—by fasting. Most of us, when we hear the word

“fast,” think of fasting from food, such as we might do before a medical exam. Why not fast from TV or the internet for a few days? Suddenly, all kinds of time become available to us. We always have time for the things that are important to us.

Okay, so we are willing to invest more time in relationship with God. So where do we start? Ask God to show you. Talk to God about whatever is on your mind and heart. That’s what prayer is—talking with God. If you need help in getting started with a prayer life, let our staff assist you.

Begin a practice of reading the Bible. I would suggest starting with one of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke or John or the book of the Psalms.

Make a commitment to attend worship every Sunday you’re in town or worshipping at another church when you are out of town. It’s no wonder we are not making progress, given our penchant for running up and down the eastern seaboard seeking amusements to ease the burden of living. We are seeking something that only God can provide.

Find a spiritual friend who can accompany you in the journey. God never intended us to fly solo. Is there someone who can encourage you and hold you accountable in your quest to love and serve God?

One of my favorite quotes from C. S. Lewis comes from his whimsical, yet altogether serious writing called *Screwtape Letters*. A senior devil, Uncle Screwtape, instructs a

junior devil named Wormwood on the fine art of tempting people. “Tell the people that God is real. Tell them they should have faith in him. Tell them that the gospel is true, that Jesus Christ died to save them from their sins. But tell them that there is no hurry. Any time is good enough to take care of such matters.”

Paul writes in 2nd Corinthians, “Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Not tomorrow, today! Not later, now!

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- C. S. Lewis

