

3 Portraits

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Date: 28 April 2019

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[0 : 00] I want you to look with me this morning for a few moments to the words that we find in Acts chapter 26, reading from verses 24 right back to verses 30.

Now I don't know if many of you have gone to visit art galleries. I remember the first time I myself went to the Louvre in Paris and I went to see the Mona Lisa and I gathered up with many many other people and I waited quite some time and I finally got there.

And unlike the rest of my scalp marks being quite uncultured, when I finally got in front of that painting I thought, is that it? I've waited this time and this is it.

And I actually found it a lot more interesting to go in London to the National Portrait Gallery there because there you will see people who shaped British history.

You will see Palmerston, you will see Disraeli, Gladstone, Peter Younger, Churchill, a whole array of people like that. But I don't think you will ever go anywhere and you will ever see portraits more important than the three I'm going to show you this morning.

[1 : 23] And if I was going to give a title to my sermon it would be the word portraits. Three portraits which deserve more attention than this three.

And you know one striking feature of the Bible and one thing we notice in the Bible is that it shows it's a rich variety of contents.

It's not just showing doctrine. It's not just rules. It's not just history. It's not just poetry and prophecy. When you look at the Bible you also see a series of lifelike portraits.

And the Bible, different from many other things, shows you people in human nature the way they are. They're not in any way airbrushed.

They're not in any way shown to be superhumans. They are shown, as we say, warts and all. We see that when we look at people like David.

[2 : 29] When we look at people like Peter. We see that they are all just fallible men and women. Men and women just like ourselves. With faults, with failings, with difficulties.

And one of the things, by showing you this way, it lets us see that, as an old minister we used to have said, the best of men are men of best.

We are there with all our failings. And we, when we look at the Bible, and when we look at the people that we see there, we see them, and we see how.

They meant to do well, but sometimes things go wrong. Now the Lord knows we often learn more from patterns and examples than from statements.

And what I mean by that is, very often, those who profess God's name, the Christians, are the world's Bible. And they look at us and see things from us.

[3 : 30] Now this well-known piece of scripture we have here shows my meaning. It forms the end of a chapter in which the Apostle Paul is making a defence of himself before Festus, the Roman governor, and before the king Agirpa.

And these men are there in front of them. They're three portraits of three very different people. The types, almost, of the three classes of people that we can see among us today.

And you know, in spite of changing fashions, in spite of scientific discussions, in spite of political reforms, the inward heart of people in every generation is always the same.

And I want us this morning to just stand before these pictures. Stand before these three portraits. Just imagining they were on the wall in front of us.

And see what we can learn from looking at them. You'll often hear it said, a picture paints a thousand words. And when we look at these portraits, when we look at these three people, we see three different people.

[4 : 51] Completely different. And it's very important to look at them. Now the first person we see in the very beginning here is Festus, the Roman governor.

That's the person who said, Paul, you're beside yourself. Much learning has made you mad. We see here Festus, the Roman governor.

Now Festus was a heathen. Festus was ignorant of any religion apart from the temple worshipping, which overspread the civilised world at the time.

From what he says to Agrippa, he seems to be totally ignorant of Judaism. Because he speaks that when he talks to Agrippa, he talks of a question of their own superstition.

And of one Jesus whom they said had risen from the dead. So obviously he has no idea of the Jewish religion at all. He was like many a different proud Roman at the time.

[5 : 56] He looked at all religions with equal contempt. He looked at them all as equally false. Or two. And all unlike were unworthy.

As for a Jew, the very idea for this Roman, for a Jew showing light to the Gentiles, that was absolutely ridiculous. That any Jew could talk of a way of salvation.

The whole religion of Festus was to please Caesar. To please his fellow people. Very like Pilate. Remember Pilate when he put Jesus to death.

He got a bowl and washed his hands. As if that would absolve him of any cry. It was the same with Festus. They were put up by Caesar.

And they wanted to stay always in Caesar's good books. And not keep the whole area quiet and people well.

[6 : 52] Now, we will meet today many people who are like Festus. They may be very respected. They may have a very good name.

But they don't have any religion. They kind of live for today. They think praying to God is just something they do at a time of crisis.

And you'll often hear that. When people hit a crisis point in their lives, they pray to God. But they think that's the only time. And maybe only attend weddings and funerals.

And like Festus, they may look on religion with contempt. And I'm sure you've met them. They're kind. They're easy. They're good-natured.

They're easy to get on with. Unless the subject of religion comes up. And the tendency today is to make an idol of intellect.

[7 : 47] And they're almost like a ruined building. And we might always say when we look at them, what would they be like if God had the rightful place in their lives?

Now, when we see someone like this woman, Gavon, when we see someone who has no word of God, we might say to ourselves, are they in a hopeless position?

No, they're not. Because we see in Scripture the man Felix. Remember when Paul talked to him. He trembled. But then he said, I'll come back whenever a convenient season.

A season that never came. We see even Pharaoh in Egypt. When the various plagues came, he actually, every time there was a plague, he almost gave this semi-repentance.

It's never too late. We see that when we read of the thief on the cross. At the very end of his life, he called and asked Jesus to remember.

[8 : 47] And that day he was in paradise. The last day will show many began like Festus and were like him, but in the end turned like the Apostle Paul.

Where there's life, there's hope. And when we look at this picture, we may say, well, it looks like a hopeless picture. We must pray for all we come in contact with.

I remember when I was young, and I'm thinking of that when I was talking to the children there. I had an old Sabbath school superintendent, a Sabbath school teacher, Alec Campbell.

He died not so long ago when he was over 100. And Alec always told when he told his testimony, he always mentioned the fact. He went away to fight in the war, and his mother had given him a Bible, and he had promised to read it.

And away he went. And he had no word of the Bible or anything else, or reading it or doing anything. But he was shipwrecked during the war. And when he found himself in the water, he said he called to God.

[9 : 52] And God heard him. And God saved him. And he was rescued hours later, more dead than alive, but he was rescued. And when he came back to the village sometime later, he came back as a changed man.

But the point he always made when he told his testimony was this, that had he not come back, everyone would have assumed that he had been more physically and spiritually lost in the depth of the Indian Ocean.

But that's not the way it worked out at all. And we don't know what happens to anyone at the end of their lives. We are told when we come in contact with people, no matter how anti what we are saying in religion might be, to pray for them.

Pray for them like this man Festus, this man who comes in front of us, this first portrait we see here, this Roman governor, who had no interest in God, no interest in anything that Paul was saying.

He actually thought Paul was mad making this statement. Now that's the first person we see. But the second person we see is the king Agrippa.

[11 : 07] Now Agrippa is a different type of person. Because Paul speaks to him here. And Paul says to him, Believest thou the prophets, I know that you believe.

Now Agrippa was the man who said, you've almost persuaded me to be a Christian. Now some commentators say that was sarcastic. But it wasn't because the next verse brings it out when Paul says, I wish you were a byon.

The word almost is put at the beginning. And it's put there very simply as emphasis. Almost thou persuadest me.

The picture of Agrippa is totally different to Festus. He's of Jewish extraction. So he's familiar with many things that Festus was ignorant of.

He understood much in Paul's address, which were raving fancies to Festus. But to Agrippa he understood it all.

[12 : 12] He had a secret, almost inward conviction, that Paul had the truth. This man felt, was moved and affected.

But he could go no further. He saw, but he didn't have the courage to act. He felt, but he didn't have the will to move.

He wasn't far from the kingdom. But he stopped outside. He didn't condemn Christianity. He didn't ridicule it.

He was a bit like the man paralysed in scripture. He just looked on. And you know we have men in our own congregations.

And everyone here knows how they stand before God. At the end of the day we're not standing before fallible sessions or ministers. We are standing before the Almighty Church.

[13 : 09] And all of us know how we stand before Him. And you know, we may know very well, doctrines, we may know very well the Bible.

But maybe this convenient season never comes. And why didn't it come for this man who was here? This man who says, you've almost persuaded me.

Why didn't it come? Well, first of all, there was, we can say, with this King Agrippa, a fear of men. He wanted the praise of men rather than God.

He was a man in a position. And he probably thought to himself, If I follow this God that Paul is talking about, I will lose my position.

He loved the world. He was King Agrippa. He was a rich man. He loved all he had. A bit like Lot's wife. Who in the end, although going away from that burning city, she looked back.

[14 : 13] He had a form of self-righteousness. This King Agrippa. And you know, there may be some of us who are these forms too. We may feel we are as good as anyone else.

We may feel a wee bit, like remember, the very solemn story we are told of the account we are given of the Pharisee in the temple, who said, I thank God I'm not like other men.

Not even like this publican. It may be that this King Agrippa, being a man of great wealth, just didn't want to give it all up.

A bit like the account we are given of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. And he went away sorrowful because he had great possessions.

Now someone in this position, almost, is neither safe nor happy. We can say it's like a painting. A painting which has been ruined.

[15 : 15] A painting which is not complete. There's one thing lacking. And the thing is, we might not even be conscious that there is one thing lacking. And the Lord made that clear when he was preaching.

When he talked about the virgins, no oil in their lamps. When he talked about the house built in the sand. It was just like any other house. But when the bad weather came, it collapsed and it crumbled.

And Paul himself, when he's speaking to this man here, to Agrippa, he says, that you would hear me this day. He doesn't say that you'd hear me in some future time.

Months away. Years away. No. That you would this day hear me. And you would this day decide. You know it's strange you'll meet people.

And they'll say they'll definitely do one day. But at the moment, they will do anything to put off. None of us have promised tomorrow. And that's true for us all.

[16 : 19] I was conscious of that some weeks ago. And sadly, I was down at Nisha Buster. I call out there. And a girl who lost her life. And I was taking statements from the other gentlemen who were there. And one of the men said, he said it two or three times to me.

We've made all our plans for the days ahead. Now I'm not saying anything about anyone. And I'm not saying anyone about anyone's lap around. But you know, we do that very often.

We make all our plans for the days and the weeks and the months ahead. And none of us knows. We are told always in Scripture when we are told or when the gospel call comes to us.

It is always today if you hear his voice. Don't put it off for a convenient season. Remember the man Felix. I'll call for you when I get a convenient season.

We're never told that convenient season ever came for that man. He goes off the pages of Scripture. We never hear of him again. We don't know what happened to him. But we're never told the convenient season would ever come.

[17 : 24] And you know the thing is, although circumstances can change. Although things might come upon us very, very quickly or unexpectedly.

It does not need to find us unprepared. For those of us who have a certain vintage, there was an old country song we used to sing years ago called Almost Persuaded.

And it was about somebody tempted to do something that would result in unhappiness. But this is the very opposite. We are being persuaded to do something which will result in happiness.

Which will result in our lives changing. And our lives will change forever. So as we see the picture of that King Agrippa. The man who's almost persuaded.

He's not in the same category of asbestos. But he still hasn't made any commitment to the Lord. And then the final person we see is the Apostle Paul.

[18 : 26] He's just a frail man. It says often he was a frail man and his speech was contemptible. And there's a lesson for us in this one. He was, although a man who was very, very educated.

And we've met people who are very, very educated. And yet, actually speaking is maybe not their fortune. It's not so easy for them. And Paul himself, they said, he was nothing to look at.

Small, thin, poor looking man. And even when he spoke, he didn't speak that well. But he stood before Nero the Emperor. He stood before people.

And the reason he was able to do that was God was upholding him. And God was strengthening him. And very often when we stand in this way, we don't do so because we think we've got anything extra to say.

We don't stand because we think that we've got anything above anyone else. We do it simply in answer to God's command to say a word and cease it. For we don't know what will prosper, whether this or that.

[19 : 31] Now there's something we can all do. You'll get people and they'll say, well there's very little I can do for the Lord. There's very little I can do for God. But there's something that always, we can all do something.

I remember growing up as a young boy. An old lady who lived in Euron. And she asked me one day, when she wasn't able to go to church anymore, would I write down the service and bring it to her?

Now that was a big ask. Because it meant, one, went out. Two, listened very closely. And did it for her. So I started doing it. And I remember going into her house one day.

And what I remember is that she was praying. And not just that she was praying. But she was praying for me. And probably many people did that. But it was the first time I was conscious of it.

And I remember when she finally passed on. When she finally passed away. I wasn't converted. But one of the thoughts that came into my mind was simply this. Who's going to pray for my lost soul now?

[20 : 30] This lady was praying for me. I was conscious of it. And we, many of us here, have had the blessings and benefits of people praying for us.

When we had no word for ourselves. And the one thing we can do is pray for people. Because we don't know when something we say. We don't know when our prayers will be answered.

And our prayer is, and our hope is, that it will result in changed lives. This man, Paul, can't say much about it. Small, fail. Speech, not very good.

But yet, he's talking away. And he says to this man. He says to this king Agrippa. I wish you were the same as I am.

Apart from my bonds. My bonds. My bonds. Now he knows what he's speaking about is right. He knows what he's speaking about is true. He had conviction. Remember in previous chapters, he stood on this hill, Mars Hill, outside Athens.

[21 : 30] And you stood on this hill, you were allowed to speak and nobody would interrupt you in any way. So he stood there. And he spoke to the very educated Athenians. And when he spoke, he told them that they were ignorant men all of them.

That there was only one way of salvation. That they would have to change their ways and repent and follow Jesus. Now, Paul here knows what he's talking about.

He talks simply here to these great men. Even although he knows what the reaction is going to be like. He talks about the fact that Jesus died and rose again.

He talks about the fact that they are all guilty sinners. The only way is to change our ways, say we're sorry for our sins and believe. He talks here about the need for a holy life.

And he talks about the reality of a world to come in heaven. Now, when we look at these three posters, pictures, three paintings, we might say that Festus and Agrippa are everywhere.

[22 : 35] But we might say that there are a few like the Apostle Paul. Apostle Paul, and in every age, there are a few like that. And they are very much the minority.

We see people like Luther, like Wesley, in past days. They were very, very much in the minority. They were likely esteemed. But the work they did was never forgotten.

The work they did redounded down through the ages. They could sing when they were in prison. They were safe and prepared to meet with God at any time. There's only one of these three paintings we see there that is safe.

And that's the Apostle Paul. And that's it. Now, when we look at these three portraits, and I hope we look at it with self-inquiry and with self-examination, it's three different people.

And it's three different reactions to the gospel. We see there, Festus mocked. He rejected it. He didn't believe it in any way.

[23 : 44] One day, he would have to visit. One day, he would have to stand before the great John. We live here nowadays very often as people.

And we hear of miscarriages of justice. And we hear of things happening, going wrong in quotes. But standing before Almighty God, he is the great judge.

There is no appeal from that aside. He is the great holy judge and the one who does all things well. We're naturally gregarious.

We like all being together. We don't like living in isolation from each other. But you know, there's an old hymn that says that one day we've got to go alone to face God.

We've got to stand one day in judgment in front of this God. And although we don't know what happened to Festus, if he carried on as he did, he stood before this God with nothing.

[24 : 45] Realising too late, far too late, that he was wrong and good nothing. We see this, the reaction of this man called Agrippa.

He seems interested. But he didn't. Paul had a temporary effect on him. And sometimes we'll come to church.

And sometimes it'll have an effect on us. And then we'll go away and we'll largely forget about it. One of the books, textbooks I used to use when I used to instruct the youngsters in higher history, started off with the words, The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

It was to do with between the wars and how there were so many good intentions. But at the end of the day, they didn't work out. And you know, good intentions for any of us, it's not enough.

It's good to have good intentions. But when we hear God speaking to us, we are told to obey his voice. And we are told to follow him now. Remember all the ones Jesus came in contact with.

[25 : 49] He didn't say, follow me in a few days. He said, follow me now. And you know, thirdly, we look on this man, Paul. Paul is different.

Paul is the one who knew the Lord Jesus as his own personal saviour. God was his judge. But God was also his saviour.

Now we don't know where Festus and Agrippa are now. We know where Paul is. We know he's in heaven. And although he's long dead and long gone, the saviour, the God who kept him, still lives and never changes.

We see in communities, we see in churches, changes all the time. God is always willing to save and receive.

And nobody would have thought that Paul, who was persecuted in a church, would ever turn out to be the way he was. He was the one who turned, it said of him, it's turned the world upside down.

[26 : 57] And my prayer and hope is that as we stand here today, and as we look at these portraits, we would look at Paul's portrait. That's the one we would be.

We would say, I am resolved to follow Jesus. You know, when we meet in this way, it's very, very unlikely we'll ever meet in the same components again.

But my hope and prayer is, that as we meet, and as we part, and as we go away, that one day we would all meet in that place where God will wipe away all tears from our eyes.

And that's the promise he gives. In life, you may have many difficulties. Many of you will have been conscious, and probably all of you, of having bad nights on the minge.

And when you do, one of the best things you can see are the lights of Stornway Harbor. Because you know you're coming in to save heaven. And it's the same in life.

[27 : 53] Although in life, we may have many difficulties. And Christians have difficulties just like everyone else. And we might look around and see people who have no interest and they have no difficulty. But God promises that no matter the difficulties we have, he will never leave us nor forsake us.

I emphasize that to the kids. He's the friend who will never leave us. In all our difficulties in life. And if we have Jesus as our own, he will always be with us.

And may we be resolved. Not to hesitate. And I'm sure there are none of us who come into the category of the first man, of that man, Fustus. We're probably all like Agrippa.

I would hope and pray most of us are like the Apostle Paul. But if any of us are coming here, and God is not our God, my prayer and hope is that you would say, the Lord, he is God.

And even to a whole here she will carry me. You would call him and ask him into your lives today. And if you do, you'll never regret it. Because God's people here will all tell you.

[28 : 58] He's the best of all masters. And may he be your master, your God, your saviour, and the one who carries you through life. And may God bless these few thoughts on his word.

Let us pray. Lord, as we come before you, we pray, O Lord, as we look at these three portraits today, we would indeed see you reflecting back on ourselves, the Apostle Paul, with all his infirmities one, who stood forth on thy side, who preached on thy side, who was not afraid to witness the deed, and has now gone to be with the God he served so faithfully.

And may each one of us be also say that we too will follow Jesus all the days of our lives, we pray, Lord, that thou wouldst do with each and every one of us.

And as we part one from the other, our prayer is that we would one day meet in a place where there will be no need to say, eyes, let us go hence. Keep us looking unto thee.

Be with us in the week ahead. Lord, we do not know what it holds. But if we know the God who holds all our tomorrows, we will be safe for time and for eternity. Keep us looking unto thee.

[30 : 11] Bless us and part us with our blessing. And pardon our sins. For Jesus' sake. Amen.