

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermon series titled, □ “The Church that Changed the World.” It is a study through the New Testament book of Acts.

Lately, it feels like I have been preaching to myself. Not because nobody is listening. But because the biblical texts we have covered relate directly to issues with which I struggle.

For example, I am a recovering control freak. And last week the big idea from the text was: Because God is in control, we don’t need to be.

Let me briefly review a couple of points because it sets up the sermon for today.

Recovering control freaks like me tend to obsessively focus on outcomes. But we’re far better off faithfully focusing on simply doing the best we can as the Spirit of God empowers, leaving the outcomes to God. The only thing we have control over is ourselves, and even that control is incomplete.

Because I have the agency of self-control, I can choose to surrender my anxious striving for control of things that are beyond my control. Because I have the agency of self-control, I can choose to accept my limitations and trust God, even though I won’t always do it perfectly.

Our text for today is □ Acts 24:1-27. In the story of this text, we are going to see apostle Paul face some circumstances that would invite most any control freak to melt down. This notion of surrendering our anxious striving for control in favor of trusting in God’s control is going to be put to the test. Along the way, we are going to learn from Paul

something about self-control. And we are going to learn from God something about his control.

You may recall that Paul had just visited Jerusalem, where he was first threatened by an angry mob, then threatened by the Sanhedrin, and then threatened by over forty conspirators who vowed to kill him.

But God is in control.

In the middle of all the trouble, the Lord appears to Paul, standing by him, encouraging him, and assuring him that he will be going to Rome to testify about Jesus. And then the Lord wondrously orchestrates Paul's emergency transfer from Jerusalem to Caesarea to be tried by the Roman governor named Felix, who keeps Paul in protective custody within his palace on the coast, away from danger and closer to Rome.

At this point, you might think that Paul would be riding high, feeling confident, sensing God's presence. The Lord himself had personally encouraged Paul and followed it up with overwhelming evidence that God was indeed sovereignly and graciously in control of Paul's circumstances.

If this was indeed a mountaintop experience for Paul, he is about to enter a valley. And isn't that the way life often works? Our faith is tested and refined in the crucible of alternating peaks and valleys.

Our text begins in □ Acts 24:1, which says,

ESV Acts 24:1 And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul.

The Roman governor, Felix had called for Paul's accusers to appear before him to make their case. It takes five days for the Jerusalem accusers to be summoned and to appear in Caesarea. From the Sanhedrin comes Ananias the high priest who had Paul struck in the mouth. Some other Jewish religious leaders called elders come with him, along with their prosecuting attorney, Tertullus.

Tertullus begins the prosecution's case by flattering Felix, the judge. In fact, he spends more time schmoozing Felix than he does accusing Paul, as recorded in □ verses 2 through 4.

ESV Acts 24:2 And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying: "Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation,"

□ ESV Acts 24:3 "in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude."

□ ESV Acts 24:4 "But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly."

Oh, brother. If I were Paul, I would have been annoyed at this brown-nosing.

Then, Tertullus brings three charges against Paul.<sup>1</sup>

The □ first charge is that Paul is a troublemaker who deliberately incites riots among Jews. This comes in the first part of □ verse 5, where Tertullus alleges,

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<sup>1</sup> Toussaint, Stanley D., "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. by J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 421.

ESV Acts 24:5 “For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world . . .”

This was a serious charge because the Roman government desired to maintain peace and order throughout the empire.<sup>2</sup>

The □ second charge is that Paul is the leader of an unauthorized cult. This comes in the last part of □ verse 5, where Tertullus claims,

ESV Acts 24:5 “and [he] is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.”

The Roman government allowed the practice of only those religions that were authorized. Judaism had already been authorized, and Christianity emerged from Judaism. Christian Jews and Non-Christian Jews worshipped the same God, and they revered the same Hebrew Scriptures. But they differed on the identity of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah foretold by the Scriptures.

Here, Tertullus tries to distance Christianity from Judaism by describing it as “sect of the Nazarenes.” In doing so, he is characterizing Paul as a leader of an unauthorized cult. The suggestion is that Paul is a violator of Roman law and a threat to Roman peace.

The □ third charge is that Paul tried to defile the Jewish temple. This comes in □ verse 6, where Tertullus asserts,

ESV Acts 24:6 “He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The Romans had given the Jews permission to execute any Gentile who went inside the Jewish temple. You may recall that Paul had earlier been accused of bringing Gentiles into the temple (Acts 21:28). But here he is merely accused of making the *attempt* before being stopped. Both accusations are patently false. Apparently, Tertullus softened the earlier accusation because it could easily be refuted for lack of evidence.

So, □ the three charges are:

1. Paul is a troublemaker.
2. Paul is the leader of an unauthorized cult.
3. Paul tried to defile the temple.

If you are following along in the *English Standard Version*, you will see that □ verse 7 is missing. Most English translations omit verse 7 because many of the ancient Greek manuscripts considered most reliable do not have it.

You may be wondering, “Well, then why didn’t they just renumber so that there isn’t a missing verse?” The problem is the *King James Version* includes verse 7 as do a few other English translations, so renumbering would throw everything off, making comparison difficult.

And now, you may be wondering, “Well, should verse 7 be there or not?”

The definitive answer is: Nobody knows for sure.

But it doesn’t make any difference. If you look in the footnote for verse 7 in the *English Standard Version* I’m using, you will see the missing verbiage. It actually includes all of □ verse 7, with added parts of verses 6 and 8. It includes these words from Tertullus about Paul,

ESV Acts 24:6 “And we would have judged him according to our law.  
7 But the commander Lysias came by and with great violence took  
him out of our hands, 8 commanding his accusers to come before  
you.”

According to this omitted-but-footnoted text, Tertullus implies that the Jews would have rightfully executed Paul by now had it not been for the Roman tribune Lysias, who violently snatched Paul away. Whether or not this was part of what Tertullus actually said doesn't really matter because the point is inconsequential.

The rest of our text is not in question. In □ verse 8, Tertullus says to Felix,

ESV Acts 24:8 “By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him.”

At this point, Tertullus rests his case and the Jews who accompanied him chime in with their agreement. □ Verse 9 explains,

ESV Acts 24:9 The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.

This is the prosecution team saying, “Yeah, what he said.”

Now, Paul gets to defend himself against the trumped-up charges brought by the slick lawyer. I want you to notice Paul's self-control throughout. He is circumspect in what he says, holding back any anger he may have felt by being wrongly accused and slandered like this. □ Verse 10 says,

ESV Acts 24:10 And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied: “Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense.”

Paul respectfully acknowledges Felix’s many years of service but makes no attempt to flatter him. Paul says he is glad to have this opportunity to defend himself. The original Greek word translated “cheerfully” can carry the idea of not just gladness but also confidence.

Then Paul addresses the three charges against him, in order. First, □ he responds to the charge that he is troublemaker. He says in □ verses 11 through 13.

ESV Acts 24:11 “You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem,”

□ ESV Acts 24:12 “and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city.”

□ ESV Acts 24:13 “Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me.”

Paul’s defense against the first charge is that he came to Jerusalem to worship, not cause trouble. And he had arrived in Jerusalem only 12 days prior, counting the 5 days he had been in custody in Caesarea. So, a week is hardly enough time for one person to incite and large-scale riot.

Moreover, Paul had done nothing to disturb the peace. He had disputed with no one. You may recall that, when Paul first arrived in Jerusalem, he met with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. At the urging of church leaders, Paul then helped four men fulfill a Jewish vow,

including accompanying them to the Jewish temple for worship. While in the temple, some antagonistic Jews from Asia who had come to Jerusalem to worship recognized Paul from his previous missionary journeys. It was these antagonistic Jews from Asia who had stirred up the Jerusalem crowds against Paul by making false accusations. Paul himself played no role in the riot. And no one could prove otherwise.

Then Paul addresses the □ second charge, that he is the leader of an unauthorized cult. In □ verses 14 through 16, he says,

ESV Acts 24:14 “But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets,”

□ ESV Acts 24:15 “having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.”

□ ESV Acts 24:16 “So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.”

Paul contends that he has not betrayed his Jewish heritage. He still serves the God of the Jews. He still believes everything in the Jewish Scriptures. His hope is still in the God of the Jews. He anticipates a resurrection in which all will appear before the God of the Jews. And before this same God, Paul’s conscience is clear.

The unmistakable implication is that, if the Romans are okay with Judaism, they ought to be okay with Christianity because they share the same roots. Paul is not a leader of some unauthorized cult.

Then, Paul defends himself against the □ third allegation that he tried to defile the Jewish temple. In □ verses 17 through 21, he says,



ESV Acts 24:17 “Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings.”

□ ESV Acts 24:18 “While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia—”

□ ESV Acts 24:19 “they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me.”

□ ESV Acts 24:20 “Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council,”

□ ESV Acts 24:21 “other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: ‘It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.’”

Paul explains that he presented offerings and purified himself in the temple. These are hardly the actions of a person bent on defiling the temple.

Moreover, Paul mentions the antagonistic Jews from Asia who instigated the riot and falsely claimed that he had brought Gentiles into the temple. Where are they now? Why did they not show up to testify? Who and where is the person they say Paul tried to bring into the temple? They ought to be present to bear witness.

Furthermore, Paul challenges the members of the Sanhedrin who are present to articulate what specific wrongdoing they have found in him. On Paul’s previous appearance in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin, he explains that their only dispute was with respect to the resurrection from the dead. This is a theological matter on which the members of

Jewish Council disagree among themselves, but it is of no consequence to Roman law.

Paul rests his case.

At this point, I imagine the atmosphere is thick with anticipation as Felix takes a few moments to deliberate.

Felix responds in  verse 22.

ESV Acts 24:22 But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.”

The phrase,  “having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way” can be taken in two different ways.

It could mean that Felix already had some understanding of the Way of Christianity before hearing from Paul. Felix’s prior source of information may have been his wife, who was Jewish.

Nevertheless, I believe an alternative understanding is more probable. I believe this means that Felix, having gained a more accurate knowledge of the Way from Paul’s defense, now decides to put off the decision. And he puts it off under the pretense of wanting to hear from Lysias on the matter.

The truth is Felix has already heard from Lysias on the matter. You may recall that Lysias had a letter delivered to Felix along with Paul. In the letter, Lysias had explained to Felix that he found nothing in Paul deserving death or imprisonment. Chances are Felix agrees with Lysias.

But Felix is stuck politically between a rock and a hard place.

On the one hand, if he exonerates Paul, then he will rile the Jewish elites. And he doesn't need that headache.

On the other hand, if he finds Paul guilty, then he runs the risk of getting into trouble for allowing the death of a Roman citizen who has violated no Roman laws. And he doesn't want that.

So, Felix kicks the can down the road, keeping Paul in custody, tabling the decision, and pretending that he wants more information from Lysias. □ Verse 23 explains,

ESV Acts 24:23 Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.

Notice Felix does not summon Lysias because he has no intention of deciding Paul's case.

Put yourself in Paul's sandals. This is a bewildering turn of events. He is neither convicted nor exonerated. He is just stuck in protective custody because of a weaseling bureaucrat.

He is in limbo.

What about Rome? Hadn't the Lord said Paul would be going to Rome?

Days go by.

Then something happens to potentially provide a glimmer of clarity and maybe hope. □ Verse 24 explains,

ESV Acts 24:24 After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus.

To be sure, Paul believed in God's sovereign control over his life. Maybe God had orchestrated all these seemingly nonsensical outcomes so that Paul could now speak to Felix and Drusilla privately about Jesus. Perhaps the plan is to lead them to faith.

Nice thought. Doesn't happen. □ Verse 25 gives the disappointing details.

ESV Acts 24:25 And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you."

Felix is frightened by the prospect of God's coming judgment, but he is apparently not ready to believe in Jesus. So, he puts that off, too.

And it gets more discouraging.

Felix does summon Paul again. But not because wants Jesus. Instead, he wants money. □ Verse 26 explains,

ESV Acts 24:26 At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him.

As a part of his defense, Paul had explained that he brought some money to Jerusalem from his missionary travels. We know from our previous studies that this money was collected from various churches to support the church in Jerusalem. Paul also had used some money to help the four Jewish men fulfill their vows.

So, Felix may have pegged Paul as a man with connections to money, thinking that perhaps Paul could work his connections to slide some of that money his way in exchange for Paul's freedom. Quid pro quo.

How discouraging for Paul to realize that Felix is just trying to milk him.

And things get even more puzzling.

□ Acts 24:27 wraps up our text, saying,

ESV Acts 24:27 When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

Stuck for two years!

Twenty-four months!

Seven hundred and thirty days!

Seventeen thousand five hundred and twenty hours!

We have no evidence that God ever explains to Paul the reason for this. We have recorded for us in Acts 23 the reassuring appearance of the Lord to Paul while he was back in Jerusalem. So, if there were any such appearance during the two years in prison in Caesarea, we would expect a record of that as well.

But there is nothing. Zero. Zip. Zilch.

Neither do we have any evidence that Paul ever tried to take control of the situation to free himself—no evidence that Paul tried to use his influence over churches to raise the money that could have freed him.

If I were Paul, I would be wondering . . .

Why is this happening to me?  
How am I going to get to Rome?  
What in the Sam Hill is going on?

Here's the big idea I draw from all this: □ When in a place where you can't see why or how, remember who.

Specifically, remember who is in control. And remember who you are representing.

God is still in control of Paul's predicament. And God has been faithful.

God promised to stand by Paul's side. And he did.

God promised to work in and through Paul. And he did.

God promised to take Paul to Rome. And he did.

But God never said how long it would take. God never explained what Paul would have to go through to get there.

A part of me thinks that it would have been helpful for God to spell everything out for Paul.

And to spell everything out for me when I am in a fix. That way I can understand. That way I can prepare myself. That way I can navigate it better.

But where does my compulsion to understand and to prepare and to navigate come from? I wonder if it comes from control-freak Bob. I wonder if my own desire for control is pretty much the opposite of faith.

I need to ask myself, who is in control?

And who are you representing?

As I consider Paul's self-control in the story of our text, I marvel that he doesn't have a meltdown. He seems to be ever mindful that he represents the Lord and comports himself accordingly.

Some of you know that I have been up to my eyeballs recently in trying to care for my aging parents. My Dad has advanced dementia. My Mom broke her ankle. Since last summer, I have been trying to qualify my Dad for some Medicaid assistance he needs, while juggling caregiving and the pursuit of alternative living arrangements for them.

Sometimes, it feels like I am dealing with a massive bureaucracy full of Felixes. A Felix is a person who seems to hold your fate in his or her hands and doesn't seem to give a rip about you. All Felix cares about is getting rid of you by whatever means possible. By putting you off. Or by giving you the runaround. Or by transferring you to somebody else. Or by giving you 17 more forms to fill out in the hopes that you will give up and go away.

On one intake form for admission to a memory care facility for advanced dementia sufferers, here's a government-required question for the patient: "Are you interested in work or school now?" No joke.

My Dad is 95 years old, doesn't always remember who I am, and can no longer write to fill out the form. In filling it out on his behalf I wrote, "I am interested in pursuing an advanced degree in aeronautical engineering so I can work for NASA." Still no word on Medicaid, but Dad now has a full-ride scholarship to ASU. Just kidding.

Not everything or everybody has been like this. I have encountered many kind and helpful people along the way for whom I am grateful. But there have been some Felixes.

And Felixes are a control freak's nightmare. In conversation with one Felix or another, I have been sorely tempted to lose it because I can't see why or how something is necessary or relevant to my situation, and/or I can't seem to get through to the Felix to get a decision, to get off the dime, to get the ball rolling.

The big idea of our text is definitely for me. When in a place where you can't see why or how, remember who.

Who is in control?

Who are you representing?

Let's pray. Lord, when we are in a place where we can't see why we're in it or how we're going to get through it, help us to remember who is in control and who we represent. Amen.