

Good morning, Moon Valley!

My father grew up on a small farm just outside of St. David. They grew produce to sell directly to grocery stores in Tucson. Year after year, the success of his family's crop was dependent on things beyond their control.

Take the weather, for example. It didn't matter how hard you worked to prepare for the growing season, if the weather did not cooperate at the right time and in the right way, yields would suffer.

And even if the weather did cooperate, crops could still be blighted by diseases or varmints that defied all efforts at control.

On the farm, nature provided an object lesson on dependency. Some important things in life are beyond our control. To produce a good crop certainly requires hard work and agricultural know-how. But a good crop also depends on elements beyond human control—uncontrollable elements that must also work in the farmer's favor.

But most of us aren't farmers. In our modern, urban culture, we are largely insulated from nature's object lessons. We have developed machinery and apps to control everything from the temperature in our homes to the lights and irrigation in our yards to the automatic payment of our bills. We live with a certain illusion of control. As such, we can easily be deluded into thinking that we have more control over things than we really do.

And this delusion can be problematic. I know from experience. I am a recovering control freak myself. I have this propensity to think that I can make things happen if I just work hard enough. Sometimes it is hard for me **not** to think this way for at least two reasons.

First, our culture generally applauds this way of thinking. Pop psychology says you can do anything or be anything you set your mind to. And there is just enough truth to this to make it appealing. To be sure, having a positive mindset and a willingness to work hard often contribute to desired outcomes. But, of course, there are limits. I won't be playing for the Diamondbacks in the world series no matter how much I set my mind to it.

Second, working hard to make things happen seems to work enough of the time to give the impression that it should work all the time. But, of course, it doesn't always work. Ask a farmer.

As appealing as the I-can-make-things-happen mentality is, it can backfire. Which is ironic. My own desire to control things is often a form of self-protection. If I control everything, then nothing can hurt me. But trying to control things can actually be a source of self-harm.

For example, I suspect that much of the anxiety I experience stems from my obsessive attempts to control things that are beyond my control. And that same obsessive attempt to control things can draw me away from a close, trusting relationship with Christ, compounding the problem. Suffering anxiety when I am not close to Christ is not a good place to be.

At the beginning of our church staff meeting last Tuesday, we were, as usual, sharing devotional thoughts with one another. Mandy Sticht shared a reading from the October 24<sup>th</sup> entry in the devotional book, *Jesus Listens* by Sarah Young. The reading included this line: "I've found that much of the stress in my life results from trying to make things happen before their time has come."<sup>1</sup> That certainly resonates with me.

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<sup>1</sup> Young, Sarah. *Jesus Listens: Daily Devotional Prayers of Peace, Joy, and Hope* (the New 365-Day Prayer Book) (p. 311). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

I often stress myself out trying to make things happen when I want them to happen.

In □ Matthew 6:27, Jesus asks a rhetorical question.

ESV Matthew 6:27 “And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”

Later, in □ John 15:5, Jesus reminds us just how much control we really have when he says,

ESV John 15:5 “. . . apart from me you can do nothing.”

Noted author and pastor, Chuck Swindoll says, □ “When we feel utterly powerless—completely unable to alter the slightest detail of the future—we actually experience life as it is. □ In truth, we *are* powerless. We always have been powerless. Our well-being is like a piece of dust in a whirlwind. □ To avoid living in terror, we construct an elaborate illusion that says we control our own destinies—until some circumstance brings us back to reality. □ God has a better way. He wants to replace our delusions of autonomy with the truth of His sovereign care for His people.”<sup>2</sup>

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

Our text is □ Acts 23:12-35. In this text, we are going to see the apostle Paul in a situation where he is utterly powerless, completely unable to alter the slightest detail of his future. He is at the mercy of things beyond his control.

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<sup>2</sup> Swindoll, Charles R., *Acts, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2016), 455-456.

In that situation, we are going to see how the Lord sovereignly cares for Paul, superintending his journey toward the fulfillment Paul's dream and God's purposes, using the most unexpected people along the way.

The big idea I draw from this story is this: □ Because God is in control, we don't need to be.

As we work our way through the story, I invite you to keep this big idea in mind, applying it to yourself. Put yourself in Paul's sandals to see how God takes care of you.

Our text begins in □ Acts 23:12-13, which says,

ESV Acts 23:12 When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. 13 There were more than forty who made this conspiracy.

Marshalling all of my skills of biblical interpretation, I have concluded that this ain't good. Having forty people under oath to neither eat nor drink until they murder you is bad.

And I get paid for this analysis.

Let me quickly review some of the background.

You may recall that Paul had just been put before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to give an account of whatever he had done to stir up the residents of Jerusalem against him.

The Sanhedrin had been unable to render any verdict because its own members began to physically fight each other and Paul over the issue of

the resurrection. The Roman tribune had to step in once again to take Paul into custody before he was torn to pieces.

While in Roman custody, the Lord made himself visible to Paul, standing by him and reassuring him saying, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome” (Acts 23:11).

For months it had been on Paul’s heart to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Acts 19:21). He had made it to Jerusalem, but given the dumpster fire that ignited there, it looked like he was stuck and might never make it to Rome.

But the Lord assures Paul that he has been at work in him all along, and that he will continue to work in him to bring him to Rome, in fulfillment of Paul’s dream and God’s purposes.

Paul had just received this encouragement from the Lord, when we are told that this conspiracy to kill Paul is brewing. The forty-plus conspirators likely include those who had originally stirred up the angry mob in Jerusalem back in Acts 21. Probably incensed by the failure of the Sanhedrin to condemn Paul, they now are resolved to take matters into their own hands. Their plan is disclosed in □ verses 14 and 15.

ESV Acts 23:14 They went to the chief priests and elders and said, “We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul.”

□ ESV Acts 23:15 “Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. . . .”

□ ESV Acts 23:15 “. . . And we are ready to kill him before he comes near.”

The chief priests and elders who were approached by the conspirators are likely some leading Sadducees on the Sanhedrin who had been opposed to Paul. The idea is that these leaders of the Sanhedrin would call another meeting under the pretense of investigating Paul more thoroughly. They would ask the Roman tribune to bring Paul before the Council once again. But according to the plan, Paul would never make it because, once out of the Roman barracks and on his way to the Sanhedrin, Paul would be ambushed and murdered by the conspirators.

The zeal of the conspirators is evident in that they would be putting their own lives at risk in murdering Paul, a Roman citizen in whom no guilt had been found.

The plot thickens in □ verse 16.

ESV Acts 23:16 Now the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.

We don’t know anything about Paul’s nephew beyond what we’re told here. Paul will refer to him as a “young man,” a term that typically describes a person in his teens, or maybe his twenties.<sup>3</sup> I’ll call him Bif. I imagine him with braces on his teeth, even though I realize they didn’t exist back then.

That his young nephew is granted access likely reflects the considerable privileges Paul enjoys as a Roman citizen in custody.

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<sup>3</sup> Swindoll, 451; Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Expanded Digital Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 934.

At this point, put yourself in Paul's sandals. Despite all the disappointments experienced in Jerusalem, you have just been encouraged by the appearance of the Lord at your side. You want to go to Rome, and you now know from what the Lord said that he wants you to go to Rome, too.

Now, with the knowledge that the Lord is on your side in going to Rome, you might be expecting things to smooth out a little, as if God might book you a non-stop to Rome in first class.

But now your young nephew, Bif with braces shows up, relaying the plan of the forty-plus conspirators to assassinate you.

This ain't good. Getting murdered could put a real damper on your plans to go to Rome.

What would you do? There is no place to run. There is no one in your corner, except maybe Bif with braces.

Paul does pretty much the only thing he can do. From a human point of view, it may look like a hail Mary pass—an option that has a slim chance of working, and one that could even endanger the life of his nephew. Paul's fate was in the hands of the others. □ Verse 17 says,

ESV Acts 23:17 Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him."

A centurion is a Roman officer in command of one hundred soldiers. The centurion reports to the tribune.

In order for Paul to be saved from this conspiracy, a number of stars need to align, and Paul controls none of them.

- The centurion must take Paul seriously and comply with his request.
- His nephew must have the courage to follow through and convey his message to the tribune accurately.
- The tribune must receive the nephew's message and take it seriously.
- The tribune must respond with favor and competence in protecting Paul against the conspirators.

Things could go horribly wrong at any point. And the Roman centurion and tribune are not exactly champions for a troublemaking Jew like Paul.

This is a control freak's worst nightmare.

But God is in control, so Paul doesn't need to be. Listen to how the story unfolds, beginning in  verse 18.

ESV Acts 23:18 So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you."

ESV Acts 23:19 The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?"

ESV Acts 23:20 And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him."

ESV Acts 23:21 "But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. . . ."



- ESV Acts 23:21 “. . . And now they are ready, waiting for your consent.”
- ESV Acts 23:22 So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, “Tell no one that you have informed me of these things.”
- ESV Acts 23:23 Then he called two of the centurions and said, “Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night.”
- ESV Acts 23:24 “Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.”

Not only does the tribune take the matter seriously, but he also provides some serious protection for Paul. He mobilizes a 470-soldier escort to take Paul away from Jerusalem to Caesarea, where his case will be considered by Felix, the Roman governor overseeing the entire region.

An escort this size would have constituted nearly half of all the Roman soldiers stationed in Jerusalem.

The tribune directs the massive escort to leave at the third hour of the night, which would be 9:00PM, under cover of darkness.

- Verses 25 and 26 tell us that the tribune wrote a letter to Felix.

ESV Acts 23:25 And he wrote a letter to this effect: 26 “Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings.”

Here for the first time, we learn the name of the Roman tribune: Claudius Lysias. In the body of the letter, Lysias writes to Felix about Paul, beginning in □ verse 27.

ESV Acts 23:27 “This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen.”

□ ESV Acts 23:28 “And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council.”

□ ESV Acts 23:29 “I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.”

□ ESV Acts 23:30 “And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.”

Lysias understandably omits the embarrassing detail that he was about to have Paul flogged before he found out he was a Roman citizen. In the letter, Lysias portrays himself as the protector of a Roman citizen from the attacks of Jews in Jerusalem.

Indeed, Lysias had been Paul’s unwitting protector, used by God to save Paul first from the angry mob in Jerusalem, then from the violent members of the Sanhedrin, and then from the murderous conspirators.

□ Verse 31 through 33 give the details of Paul’s journey with the escort.

ESV Acts 23:31 So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.

- ESV Acts 23:32 And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him.
- ESV Acts 23:33 When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him.

Let's retrace their journey on this □ map.

Beginning at 9:00PM, the 470 Roman soldiers plus Paul set out from Jerusalem, traveling northwest about 35 miles □ to Antipatris. This was not an easy distance for the foot soldiers to march. At a rate of 4 miles per hour, it would have taken the better part of 9 hours. Traveling all night was usually reserved for emergency situations.<sup>4</sup>

Upon arrival in Antipatris, they likely rested. With the danger to Paul largely behind them, 400 of the foot soldiers then returned to Jerusalem, while the 70 horsemen took Paul the remaining 27 miles □ to Caesarea.

That is going to lot of trouble for just one Jewish guy. Why?

Somebody must have been pulling some strings.

I think the Lord wants Paul to know something. And Luke, the writer of Acts wants us to know the same thing. It's our big idea: □ Because God is in control, we don't need to be.

In Caesarea, Paul is safe, 62 miles away from the death threat and 62 miles closer to Rome. And he was in control of none of the factors that got him there. In this part of the journey, he was figuratively and literally along for the ride. God was orchestrating the details.

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<sup>4</sup> Keener, 3340.

□ Verses 34 and 35 round out our story with a description of Felix's response to the letter.

ESV Acts 23:34 On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, 35 he said, "I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive." . . .

□ ESV Acts 23:35 . . . And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium.

Governor Felix ascertains that Paul's case is within his jurisdiction, and he allows Paul to stay in Herod's praetorium, which is the palace of the governor. Here is a □ photo of the ancient remains of Herod's palace in Caesarea.

Paul is under guard, and he is not free to go wherever he wants. Nevertheless, there are certainly worse places to be held than the governor's palace on the coast.

Within a span of perhaps 24 hours, Paul goes from death threat in a barracks to safe retreat by the sea, closer to Rome. And all of it was beyond Paul's control.

And the surprising MVPs of Paul's escape from Jerusalem are Lysias and his nephew, Bif with braces.

Of course, it's all a coincidence. Paul was lucky.

Not.

God is sovereignly in control. Everything that happens to Paul and us God either prescribes or permits. And he does so according to his

infinite wisdom and his infinite love for us in the context of his good plan.

Which brings us back to the big idea: □ Because God is in control, we don't need to be.

Chances are good this big idea has raised some questions.

One question might be: If I am not in control, does that mean that I don't need to work hard, that I don't need to pursue excellence, that I don't need to give my best effort toward worthy causes? Do I just let go and let God, adopting a fatalistic attitude?

The short answer is no.

It is helpful to distinguish between control and agency. This distinction is explained by □ Dr. Sharon Hodde Miller in her recent book titled, *The Cost of Control: Why We Crave It, the Anxiety It Gives Us, and the Real Power God Promises*. She says, □ “God does not give us control, but he does give us agency.”<sup>5</sup>

Miller describes agency as □ “the power to influence ourselves and our circumstances.” She says, □ “agency is one of the things that distinguishes us as unique creations who bear the image of God. □ We were neither designed to be robots, nor animals driven by instinct. □ We can dream, we can laugh, we can confess our struggles, and we can empathize. □ We have a freedom and independence that no other creature has.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Miller, Sharon Hodde. *The Cost of Control: Why We Crave It, the Anxiety It Gives Us, and the Real Power God Promises* (p. 165). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 177.

But this influence has definite limits, we would do well to accept these limitations. Miller says, □ “The difference between control and agency is the difference between accepting our limitations and constantly thrashing against them.”<sup>7</sup>

Control obsessively focuses on outcomes; agency faithfully focuses on simply doing the best we can as the Spirit of God empowers us, leaving the outcomes to him.

Take Paul in our story. He didn’t have control over his circumstances. But he did exercise his agency in asking the centurion for his help. Besides praying, it was all he could do. It didn’t seem like much, but it was enough.

Another question might be: Do I have control over anything at all?

The answer is yes and no. Miller says, □ “The only thing we have control over is ourselves, and even that control is incomplete.”<sup>8</sup>

Scripture repeatedly speaks of self-control as a godly virtue to be pursued (e.g., Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Peter 1:5-7).

A good definition of self-control is the ability to “choose the important thing rather than the urgent thing.”<sup>9</sup> Miller explains,

□ *I might feel an urgent need to get a new outfit for a special occasion. Alcoholics might feel an urgent need for a drink. □ If you are dating someone, you might feel an urgent need to be physically close to them. □ But self-control asks, “What is more important?” Getting the new outfit or saving money? □ Having the drink or*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 182, Tim Keller, quoted by Miller.

*maintaining sobriety? Having sex with someone you are not married to or honoring them, yourself, and God by abstaining?*

□ *Scripture tells us that we have the power to choose the important. Unlike animals, we are not controlled by instincts and urges . . .*

□ *Because of our God-given agency, we have the control to make choices about our character and who we want to be.* □ *Because we have self-control, we are not captive to our worst impulses. But we do not have total control. Not yet.*<sup>10</sup>

After many years living as a Christian, Paul lamented his own lack of self-control in □ Romans 7:15, saying,

ESV Romans 7:15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

In the broader context of our story, we have seen Paul exercise self-control, but not perfectly. Remember, he lost his cool with the high priest.

Ironically, because I have the agency of self-control, I can choose to surrender my anxious striving for control of things beyond by 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.

Which brings us right back to the big idea: □ Because God is in control, we don't need to be.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 182.

Let's pray. Lord, help us to surrender our anxious striving for control, trusting you instead to care for us and to do what is best for us. Help us to realize that because you are in control, we don't need to be. Amen.