

Think about a decision you've been putting off. Not something small like what to have for dinner. Something real. A conversation you know you need to have. A habit you know is costing you more than you're admitting. A step of faith you keep telling yourself you'll take when the time is right.

Most of us aren't avoiding those decisions because we don't know what to do. We're avoiding them because some part of us already knows, and knowing is uncomfortable. So we manage it. We wait for more information. We wait for a better season. We wait for the timing to feel right.

But that's not really waiting; that's just avoidance.

There's a man in Scripture who did exactly this. His name is Felix, he is the Roman governor of Judea, and by the end of his story he'll have delayed a decision about Jesus for two full years without ever quite admitting that's what he was doing.

Let me give you a little context before we jump into the text. Paul has been arrested in Jerusalem and shipped off to Caesarea, where he's on trial in front of Felix. The Jewish leaders have brought a paid lawyer to make their case. Paul answers calmly and specifically. And then Luke does something unusual. Instead of giving us a verdict, he gives us two private, personal scenes between Felix and Paul. That's where our text picks up.

Acts 24:22-27 NLT

22 At that point Felix, who was quite familiar with the Way, adjourned the hearing and said, "Wait until Lysias, the garrison commander, arrives. Then I will decide the case."

23 He ordered an officer to keep Paul in custody but to give him some freedom and allow his friends to visit him and take care of his needs.

24 A few days later Felix came back with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish. Sending for Paul, they listened as he told them about faith in Christ Jesus.

25 As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened. "Go away for now," he replied. "When it is more convenient, I'll call for you again."

26 He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him.

27 After two years went by in this way, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And because Felix wanted to gain favor with the Jewish people, he left Paul in prison.

PRAY

### **POINT 1: Close, But Not Changed**

Here's what you need to know about Felix. He wasn't born into power. He started life as a slave. The emperor Claudius freed him and his brother Pallas, and Pallas became one of Claudius's most trusted men in Rome. That connection is the only reason Felix ended up governing Judea at all.

A freed slave appointed to rule a province was unusual enough that Roman society took notice of it. The historian Tacitus, writing not long after, summed him up in one line: “Felix exercised the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave.” In other words, a man who had real authority but ran it like someone still scrambling to protect himself.

Verse 22 tells us Felix was “quite familiar with the Way.” This wasn't his first exposure to the gospel. Verse 24 tells us that later, Felix himself sends for Paul specifically to hear him talk about faith in Christ Jesus. So this doesn't mean Paul is requesting these meeting. Felix is asking to meet with Paul himself.

Think about this for a moment. Felix had more direct, personal access to the truth about Jesus than almost anyone in the New Testament outside the apostles themselves.

**If proximity to truth was the thing that saved us, Felix should be a slam dunk.**

But he isn't. Because being close to the truth and being changed by it are not the same thing. You can grow up in church. You can know your Bible front to back. You can have Christian parents, a Christian spouse, Christian friends, years of sermons behind you. None of that is the same as actually letting the truth land. **Felix is proof that you can be near God your whole life and still walk away unchanged.**

Whether you're new to church or have been in church your whole life, this should give all of us pause to reflect on our faith journey.

Felix wasn't confused about whether the message was true. He trembled because, on some level, he believed it. If your hesitation is real and you haven't found good answers to your questions yet, that's not the same thing as what we're about to watch Felix do, but I encourage you to stay with me anyway.

## **POINT 2: The Cost Gets a Name**

In Verse 25, Paul doesn't soften anything because he's talking to a man in power now. He reasons with Felix about three things: righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment, and none of the three are random.

This is a governor who's built a career on corruption and cruelty, married to a woman he's not entitled to, sitting in judgment over a case he has no intention of judging honestly.

Righteousness names the corruption.

Self-control names the marriage.

The coming judgment names the case sitting in front of him right now, the one he already knows he's going to decide dishonestly.

Paul isn't describing Felix's soul in general terms. He's showing him the actual price of yes.

Take Felix's wife, Drusilla, for example. She's sitting right there next to Felix, barely twenty years old, already on her second marriage. She'd been married off young to her first husband, and Felix, with the help of a hired sorcerer, talked her into leaving him to marry Felix instead.

I want to pause on that for a second. A young woman was manipulated by a powerful man into a marriage she didn't choose for herself, and now she's sitting in the room while that same man is confronted about self-control.

If that kind of story is part of your own history, being controlled, pressured, or manipulated by someone who had power over you, I want to say this directly: that wasn't your fault, and it isn't erased just because it happened a long time ago or because no one else ever named it. God sees exactly what was done to you, the

same way He saw exactly what was done to her. This isn't just a random note in the text. It's a real person's story, and if it's yours too, it matters here.

So Paul isn't preaching a generic sermon on morality. He's naming exactly what's happening in the room and it works. Verse 25 says Felix became frightened. Some translations say he trembled.

Let's name what that actually is, because I don't want to lose anybody here with a churchy word. **Conviction is what happens when the Holy Spirit shows you, clearly and specifically, that something in your life is wrong.** It's stronger than a feeling. It's a real recognition. It's not guilt for guilt's sake, and it's not shame, because shame pushes you away from God while conviction pulls you toward Him. It's the moment you can't pretend anymore: this is wrong, and something has to change.

Maybe you've felt that during a sermon before that landed a little too close to something you'd been avoiding. Maybe it was reading your Bible on your own, and a verse wouldn't let you off the hook. Maybe it was a friend, or your spouse, saying something true about you that you didn't ask them to say. That feeling has a name: conviction. It's the Holy Spirit doing exactly what He does best.

The counselor Dan Allender wrote a whole book on this called The Cry of the Soul: How Our Emotions Reveal Our Deepest Questions About God. He says this about emotions: "Ignoring our emotions is turning our back on reality; listening to our emotions ushers us into reality. And reality is where we meet God."

So think about this. Fear, anger, sorrow, none of it is static or noise to manage your way past. It's information, and sometimes it's specifically information about a cost you already sense is coming. When Felix feels that jolt of fear in verse 25, he's doing the math in real time, and the only question left is whether he'll pay it or find a way to keep stalling.

That's the good news buried in this story. The Spirit really was working on him. The question was never whether truth would reach him. It clearly did. The question was whether he'd actually pay it.

### **POINT 3: Managing the Fear**

Here's where it gets uncomfortable, because this is where Felix stops being a Roman governor from two thousand years ago and starts looking a lot like us.

Once you know what something is going to cost you, you don't usually walk away immediately. You look for a way to maintain the relationship without paying the price. Felix's fear from verse 25 doesn't disappear; he just finds a cheaper way to manage it. To see exactly how that works, it helps to borrow a phrase from someone who's watched this pattern up close.

Pete Scazzero pastored a growing church in New York City for years. By his own account, he avoided conflict in the name of Christianity. He ignored his own anger and fear. He lived without real boundaries. Eventually, it broke him, and it forced him to get honest. Out of that, he wrote down ten diagnostic symptoms of what he wrote into his book: Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to Be Spiritually Mature, While Remaining Emotionally Immature.

In this book, the very first symptom everything else grows out of is this: “Using God to run from God.” He gets specific about what that actually looks like. He goes on to say:

Few killer viruses are more difficult to discern than this one. In my case, using God to run from God is when I create a great deal of “God-activity” and ignore difficult areas in my life God wants to change. Some examples might be:

- I use God to run from God when I do God's work to satisfy me, not Him.
- I use God to run from God when I do things in His name He never asked me to do.
- I use God to run from God when my prayers are really about God doing my will, not my surrendering to His.

Felix actually does a version of all three, and every one of them is a way of extracting the benefit of Paul's presence while dodging the actual bill.

Sending for Paul again and again looked like spiritual hunger, but Luke tells us it was really the hope of a bribe. That's Felix trying to get something valuable out of the relationship for free.

“I'll decide when Lysias comes” looked like careful judgment, but it was really about staying in control of the outcome rather than actually deciding anything.

And leaving Paul in prison as a parting favor to the Jewish leaders looked diplomatic, but it was pure political self-interest, choosing what was convenient over what was right.

None of it was ever really about seeking God. It was managing the appearance of seeking Him while keeping the real cost off the table. “Go away for now, when it's convenient I'll call for you” sounds like a man managing a relationship with God. It's actually a man trying to keep the relationship without ever paying what it asks.

I've watched this pattern play out more times than I can count over the years. Someone hits a hard season: a marriage falling apart, a loss, a diagnosis, a heavy emotion they're carrying, and somewhere in that season they start pulling back from the church.

Not always all at once. Usually a little at a time. And the reason almost always sounds reasonable: I just need some space to process. I need some time before I'm ready to be around people.

I want to be careful here, because that need can be real. Grief is real. Anxiety is real. Depression is real. None of that is a spiritual failure or something to wave off as an excuse. I know that firsthand. I've dealt with anxiety myself, enough that I take medication to help regulate it, so I'm not speaking about this from the outside.

But here's what I've noticed almost every time. **The hardest seasons aren't the ones to face alone. They're the ones community was built for.** I've watched people discover, months later, that the withdrawal never actually gave them the relief they were hoping for. It just left them carrying the hard season alone, on top of everything else.

I don't know any one person's heart in these moments. But it's hard not to see some similarities with Felix in his story. The reason for pulling back is often real. But **what you're protecting is exactly what this community is built to carry.**

Pete Scazzero didn't stay stuck in that pattern either. Naming it in himself is what led him to actually step back from leading his church for a season, admit he wasn't as fine as he looked, and finally deal honestly with what he'd been avoiding. That's the only version of this story that doesn't end the way Felix's does: two wasted years and a door that never gets walked through.

This is worth being honest about in our own lives too. **It's possible to use religious language, even genuine spiritual experiences, as a way of avoiding God rather than meeting Him.** We can have a real moment of conviction, feel the actual cost of following Jesus, and then immediately go looking for a reasonable-sounding delay.

At some point in our lives, we will all feel the tension between what we know and what we're not yet willing to pay for. The good news is, that's not something we are required to keep managing.

Felix had that tension too, and no amount of political skill or self-management ever closed it for him, because it isn't the kind of gap that's resolved by managing it better. It's resolved by paying it. Felix had Jesus described to him, in detail, by Paul himself. **It was never about the schedule. It was about the surrender.**

#### **POINT 4: The Price of Yes**

Here's what's been true the whole time, even before Felix ever walked into that room. Saying yes to Jesus is never free. It's never been free for anyone.

Look at anyone in Scripture who genuinely said yes, and you'll see a life that got disrupted in some real way.

Take Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, a respected member of the Jewish ruling council, a man with a career and a reputation to protect. John tells us he came to Jesus at night, and that wasn't an accident. Being seen with Jesus in daylight would have cost him standing among his peers, so he came under cover of dark to ask his questions quietly. But follow his story forward.

By John 19, after Jesus has been crucified, Nicodemus shows up again, this time in broad daylight, helping take Jesus's body down and prepare it for burial, a public act that put him on record as aligned with a man his own colleagues had just executed. That's the shift. A careful nighttime visit became an exposed, costly commitment.

The disciples said yes, and it cost them their nets, their fishing boats, their trade, the normal lives they'd already built, and ultimately, their lives. In Luke 18, a wealthy man asked Jesus what he still needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to

sell everything he owned and follow. The man walked away sad, because he wanted eternal life without letting go of what he already had.

For Felix, real repentance was never going to be free, and some part of him knew it the whole time. That's why he kept sending for Paul while never once paying what Paul had named.

We do the same thing, just with quieter language. We want the peace of Jesus without the lordship of Jesus. We want Him to bless the life we've already planned instead of surrendering it to Him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor who was eventually executed for standing against the Nazi regime, had a name for that. He called it **cheap grace**.

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

The opposite isn't comfortable. It's costly, because it actually asks something of you. But it's the only kind that's real.

“**Costly grace** is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'Ye were bought at a price', and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.”

What Felix wanted, and what a lot of us still want, isn't grace at all. It's postponement. That's what makes Felix's two years of hedging so tragic. He wasn't just missing out on comfort. He was refusing an entirely different kind of life, because he wasn't willing to let go of the one he already had.

## **Point 5: Two Wasted Years**

Verse 27 tells us that, for two years, Felix kept having these conversations with Paul. He was never rude to him, never cruel. Paul's custody was even lenient. Friends could visit. He had freedom within his confinement. From the outside, nothing dramatic ever happened.

And that's exactly the point. The tragedy of Felix isn't a dramatic rejection. It's two wasted years of a door being left open and never walked through. Nothing catastrophic marks the moment it was lost. It's just quietly, repeatedly, not decided.

Think about what those two years could have actually held. Felix had Paul, arguably the greatest theological mind of the early church, sitting under guard a short walk away, available to him, for two straight years. He could have asked him anything. He could have known Christ the way few people in history ever had the chance to. He could have died as a man who found peace instead of one still managing his fear and anxiety. Instead, he used that access to angle for a bribe. A real opportunity wasted on small ambition.

That's usually how it goes for us too. Nobody wakes up one day and declares they're walking away from God. It's smaller than that. It's just another year of I'll get to it, stacked on the year before, because the cost never stopped feeling too high to pay today.

## INVITATION

That's exactly what the writer of Hebrews is pushing back against a few years later, writing to people who knew Felix's story pattern well because they were living versions of it themselves.

Hebrews 3:7-8 NLT

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

Not someday. Not when it's convenient. Today.

If something in this text has felt uncomfortably familiar today, don't pull the ejection lever just yet. Ask yourself what's actually underneath it.

Felix had every advantage that we don't: The Apostle Paul himself, in the room, telling him exactly what it would cost to say yes. And it still came down to one

choice, made over and over: **will I actually pay it, or will I keep managing my fear to avoid the bill?**

I want to be honest with you about that cost, because Felix's story doesn't work without it, and neither does yours. Saying yes today might cost you something real. It might be a relationship you know isn't good for you but don't want to give up. It might be control over your own decisions. It might be the version of your life you already had planned before you ever walked in here. Jesus never hid that cost from anyone who said yes to Him, and He isn't hiding it from you either.

But here's the part Felix never got to see. The One asking you to pay it already paid first.

There's a scene in John 21 that shows what it looks like on the other side of that. Peter had denied even knowing Jesus, three times, the night everything fell apart, out of the exact same kind of fear we've been talking about. After the resurrection, instead of running toward Jesus to sort it out, Peter goes back to what he knew. He goes fishing. He returns to his old life instead of facing what he'd done.

Jesus finds him anyway. He doesn't ambush him with a list of accusations. He builds a fire, cooks him breakfast, and asks him one question, three times: do you love me? Three questions for three denials. Then He hands him work to do. Feed my sheep. Take care of my lambs. No lecture first. No waiting period. Restoration, offered before Peter had done a single thing to earn it back, or paid anything toward it himself.

That's the same move He's making with you. Every person in Scripture who actually paid the cost of yes would tell you the same thing Peter would have told you: it was worth it. His yes eventually cost him his boat, his trade, and his own life, and not once do we see him say it wasn't worth it.

Here's what I want you to actually picture.

Picture the part of you that's been standing guard this whole time, finally getting to stand down. Not because the cost wasn't real. Because you're not the one carrying it alone anymore.

Picture your body itself settling, that low-grade tension you've carried so long you stopped registering it as tension. And now it's easing because shame only survives in hiding. It doesn't survive very long in the light.

Picture being fully known, every part, even the parts you've kept managed and out of view, and finding out the connection doesn't break. It holds. That's what's actually waiting for you on the other side of today, because of what Jesus already did.

He didn't wait for you to get safe enough to approach Him. He moved toward you first, on the cross, the same way He moved toward Peter on that beach, before either of them ever gave Him a reason to. What's waiting isn't more scrutiny. It's a Father who already knows the worst of it, already knows what it's going to cost you, and hasn't looked away.

Maybe that choice looks like the one Felix should have made: to stop managing a fear you already know is conviction, and actually pay what it's asking of you. Maybe it's simpler than that. Maybe it's just bringing an honest doubt into the light instead of carrying it alone in the dark. I don't know which one is true for you. You do.

Whatever it costs you, it's worth it. Don't let today become one more year quietly stacked on the ones before it. The door is open right now. Today.