

When chains are a blessing

by Fred Tomlinson

This sermon focuses on the story of the Apostle Paul in Acts, highlighting his imprisonment and the questions of doubt and regret he may have faced. It emphasizes God's sovereignty in all circumstances, the deeper work God does in our hearts during challenging times, and the importance of seizing unique opportunities even in chains.

Scripture: Romans 8:28, Ephesians 2:4, Esther 4:14, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 1:12, Romans 8:31, Psalm 46:10, Isaiah 41:10, James 1:2

Topics: "God's Sovereignty", "Finding Purpose in Adversity"

Description

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Transcript

Well, thank you, Joni. It really is genuinely a pleasure to be here with you on this channel and I appreciate the opportunity to talk to these people who are your people. It really is a privilege for me.

I want to centre my talk today around a question which I think all of us, I hope I'm not being presumptuous when I say that, but I think all of us ask ourselves from time to time, perhaps some of us do it more frequently than others, but the question is this. Did I make the right decision? And that can be sort of formed in a variety of different ways, but that's what it amounts to as I'm thinking about it just now and you know there are times, perhaps it has to do with getting older, but you have sleepless nights and it's often during those sleepless nights when your mind is thinking and wondering and perhaps there's been some particular issue you've been involved with or some decision that you've made or didn't make, whatever the case may be, and the question comes to your mind, did I make the right decision? And I think that kind of thing, wanting to make the right decision, is something everyone shares, but the fact is when you're a Christian, when you love the Lord and you're anxious to hear him speaking to you and directing you and you're anxious to respond properly as is required and as human beings I think there are times when we ask ourselves, you know, did I respond properly in that situation? Well with all of that in mind, my Bible's open here to the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles and in chapter 21 I'm thinking about the Apostle Paul. In this particular session, just because of the nature of the way I think I'm going to proceed, there's a sense in which I might be all over the place a little bit here because the Apostle Paul occupies such a large section of this part of the Acts of the Apostles and the issue that I want to draw out is kind of, it's all over

that section.

Well I can't read it all, I hope you might want to at some point, but in chapter 21, let me just read a few verses. I'm going to read from verse 8 and down a little ways from there. The next day we that were of Paul's company departed and came into Caesarea and we entered into the house of Philip the Evangelist which was one of the seven and abode with him.

And the same man had four daughters virgins which did prophesy and as we tarried there many days there came down from Judea a certain prophet named Agabus and when he was come to us he took Paul's girdle and bound his own hands and feet and said thus saith the Holy Ghost so shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. And when we heard these things both we and they of that place besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered what mean ye to weep and to break my heart for I am ready not to be bound only but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

And when he would not be persuaded we ceased saying the will of the Lord be done. Amen. And this particular incident here and there's a lot that could be said about it in particular which I can't do in this session but it evolved as these next chapters continue on.

You see a little lower down the Apostle Paul having left that particular setting he's now in Jerusalem and I'm looking down into verse 21 and on I can't read all that I wish I could but we get down to verse 27 let me read. And when the seven days were almost ended the Jews which were in Asia when they saw him in the temple they stirred up all the people and laid hands on him crying out men of Israel help this is the man that teacheth all men everywhere against the people and the law and this place. And further besought Greeks also into the temple and hath polluted this holy place for they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus from Ephesus whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple and then the whole city was moved and ran together and well chaos breaks loose there in this situation.

And that trigger there that's taking place it's Paul he's got his mind set on going to Jerusalem if we were to read more widely we'd see that there were several different occasions leading up to the occasion where we've met Agabus the prophet where the saints of God have cautioned the Apostle Paul that he should not go to Jerusalem at all and you heard Paul respond in the verse I quoted a little earlier we said what are you trying to do to make me weep and break my heart he said I'm set to do this I'm not ready just to be bound I'm ready to die for the Lord Jesus and they saw his determination his commitment as it were and they backed off at that point and said well may the will of the Lord be done in this matter. Then he goes on into the temple area and there's a number of things that are developing here in this chapter leading up to this response from the Jewish leadership and they think they've got Paul on this issue of taking one of his Gentile friends into the area of the temple in which Gentiles were prohibited to go. There's actually no suggestion that Paul did that in fact did you notice how in verse 29 that I read to you it said they supposed that he'd done it in other words they saw an opportunity to accuse him and they weren't very interested in whether there was going to be proof and evidence they were just making the accusation and the next thing you know the whole city's riled up and things really break loose in a big way and that triggers and starts off a whole series of developments and situations which as a matter of fact occupy the next six chapters of the Acts of the Apostles right up to the very end as a matter of fact and so we're at a point here when this was the moment when it really really came apart for Paul and so on and it all ended up as we know from reading the very last words of the book of the Acts of the Apostle Paul who did go to Rome and he ended up incarcerated in Rome that's about the overview there of what's going on and we can say without any

doubt at all that that to be incarcerated or imprisoned is something that is fundamentally unnatural to us it's unnatural to life for it to be restricted and it's certainly unnatural to us as human beings to be locked up there was a time when I used to do some locking up and I visited some prisons and to see men in virtual cages and big heavy steel gates clanging and locking and so on and you look at these people regardless of what they've done I'm not making any judgment about that I'm just saying to be in such a situation it is not natural for us at all and certainly as far as the Apostle Paul is concerned we know from reading through the whole story that he was called by God to preach he was equipped by God to preach he was he was called to the open road to go out there and travel and preach and clearly this was his great joy and he saw God by his spirit working through his ministry and impacting the lives of men and women and transforming them and so on what calling in life could be more fulfilling and more wonderful than that and he was engaged in it very definitely called by God called by Jesus himself as you will remember and and he was commissioned to go out into this activity and he knew also that this message that he carried and don't forget no one had but New Testaments in those days but he knew that the message that he was carrying he'd received sovereignly from God and it was the most needed message in the whole world the gospel was everything and it was entrusted to him he was going out he'd been doing it he faced lots of opposition of course he did and we know some of the things that happened to him but nevertheless this was his life it was his joy and so on but when we find him in this place at the end of the book of Acts his traveling days are over so far as his mind is concerned at that point anyway we'll talk about that again in a minute but not only is he incarcerated he's imprisoned he's restricted he's held in bondage as it were by the Roman leadership at that point but on top of that he's awaiting a trial before Nero the Caesar and he would not know how that was going to turn out you know would it be the executioner's sword in the end and you know I think it's I don't want to impose upon the apostle Paul that which is completely inappropriate and was never the case but I'm looking at Paul in this situation with the kind of background I've just described to you and now he's in this place and okay he said I'm ready for this we heard him saying it and praise God for that kind of zeal and commitment but the fact is as he sat there in that place not knowing how things were going to unfold ahead I mean what I'm doing I'm sort of highlighting what I think is just his humanity I'm imagining that if that was me in that situation I think I'd be tempted to ask the kind of question I asked at the top of this talk and I'd say you know was anything that I've done in the unfolding of these chapters and these events was anything I've done or decided was it foolish did I make any foolish action was it me rather than a leading of the Lord and so I think I'd be asking myself those kind of things I might ask myself looking back to what's in this 21st chapter you're open as what was I wrong was I foolish at least to engage in those Jewish traditions that you'll find recorded there was I even foolish to have Trophimus just in the temple though was that was that necessary was that a wise thing because it somehow changed everything well then I might be asking myself um was I was I foolish to appeal to uh betrayed by Caesar chapter 25 I think it's verse 11 you find this was his his choice and um if you're hearing some dinging going on here this is I don't know how to turn that off on my there's a telephone call message is coming in I can't stop them because they're not mine they're my wife's but here I am the fact is um I know that you as I'm speaking to you today you're not chained by a Roman soldier you don't feel trapped in that kind of situation but there is a distinct possibility because I don't know all of the people I'm talking to as I share these things distinct possibility that perhaps you do feel trapped and kind of chained for one reason or another um it could be because you made a particular decision recently or a long time ago and you took a certain action or perhaps you didn't take an action that you should feel you should have done as you look back on it and the fact is for some people those kind of situations bring its own kind of captivity this own kind of bondage um you know where you think you know what as a Christian person I think I think I screwed up back there at that particular time and I know this and you will know this as well

that as soon as we open the door for this kind of very negative thinking or where we're reviewing things that probably we should have left behind a long time ago I had the Lord deal with a long time ago but at that particular time when we open the door we we do in fact open the door to the enemy and there is he who is referred to in scripture as the accuser of the brethren who is who is always active always looking to seize upon any moment to trip us up to bind us up to hinder us to damage us or even to destroy us if he could and Jesus said that that was about the sum total of what he's all about and because that satan is the is the archenemy of Jesus Christ as soon as we surrender our lives to him and surrender our lives to him and seek to live for him and for his glory it's as though there's a target on our back as it were maybe on our front as well and the enemy's just looking for any opportunity where he can just drive a wedge in with his great sledgehammer of lies and bring us into bondage this is this this is my it goes on in my life I'm sure it goes on in yours as well and so on and those demonic whispers I can imagine would tend to say you know what you messed up so badly you're never ever going to be able to amount to much as far as the things of God are concerned as far as any kind of ministry is concerned perhaps I'm talking to some people who've been involved in Christian ministry and then something's derailed trying to imagine what that would be that brings you to this place and the enemy's saying okay that's it it's all over you're finished you know that's the end of it and of course it could be other things other factors are involved it could be a conclusion that you come to as the result of of just your age you know what as you get older and and you've lost your zing and your energies and activities and opportunities the enemy's there say well you're done you've you've had your time there's nothing to look forward to in this life now and so on God can't really use you now well maybe it's the result of some some terrible illness that sort of put you out to one side and you know as I'm saying these things let me just tell you what's coming to my mind my father was an invalid all of his life and he had friends who were invalids and some of them came to our house and I could tell stories about a number of them I can remember one man his name was Bill I won't put his name out on the internet right now but his name was Bill and Bill was a Christian man a Christian believer and he in his earlier life he believed that God had spoken to him and told him he wanted to him to go on to the mission field but but before that happened Bill met a young lady and he married the young lady and as the result of that he never did get to the mission field and and he he the lie that he was believing that was just just eating his very heart away was that his disability now which was terrible was was an act of God of punishment for what if for his disobedience back there at that earlier stage choosing the girl over the leading of of God terrible terrible tormenting lie the enemy is he's he's an he's the accuser of the brethren but he's he's the ultimate tormentor given an opportunity he'll have a heyday with you and so on there are a lot of other issues let me just allude to a couple others it may be just something that's going on in your home something that's going on in your marriage something related to the children all these kind of issues that are part and parcel of life they sort of carry with them the potentials um to to become fodder for the enemy or ammunition for the enemy i should say perhaps and so on you know i'm reminded of something that an old american preacher said i never did meet this preacher but his name was vance havner some of you will maybe have heard of him maybe you've read something of him he was a gentleman um with a unique story um but i remember him saying on one occasion he was referring back to um a cbs newscaster who was very famous um his name was walter cronkite and every night this is how the story was told up when i heard this i lived in england so i didn't know cbs and i didn't know walter cronkite i'm more familiar now um but in any event this is how vance havner told the story he said every night when walter cronkite signs off the evening news he he says well that's the way it is and vance havner said every time i hear him say that i want to say no walter you're wrong that's the way it seems and i thought that was very interesting and uh you know um i want to address this to you whoever you are who are under the attacks of the enemy right now where you feel you've just been laid aside there's no future hope for god to really get hold of your life

and use you anymore and you're tempted to sort of allow the words not that they'll come in this form exactly to find a lodging place in your heart well that's the way it is that that's it you know and and i want to tell you no no no that's not right that's just the way it seems that's the way the word is coming to you but it's not coming to you from god isn't it amazing how we can be so slow to comprehend the the grace of god i love that passage in in in ephesians you know in chapter two paul is saying you know in time past we walked according to the course of this world according to the prince of the power of the air the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience among whom we all had our manner of life in times past fulfilling the lust to the flesh and the desires of the flesh and of the mind and whereby nature the children of wrath even as others but god those two words but god who is rich in mercy for his great love wherewith he loved us even when we were dead in sins he hath quickened us together with christ by grace you are saved amen isn't that wonderful and i want to bring to you today my dear friend the word of god he's the god of all grace and his heart is open to you and you know i hope you don't mind me quoting some people outside of the bible but i told you i'm from england well once upon a time there was a prime minister who became a sir and that his name was winston churchill and in 1942 in the midst of the the second world war lots was going on he made this statement over the air he made it at a particular dinner actually but it was broadcast all over and it's been repeated i'm sure many many times over the years he said to those who were listening now this is not the end he said it's not even the beginning of the end but it is perhaps the end of the beginning and you know what that doesn't come out of scripture but i think i can find the truth of scripture resonating in that statement you know when the enemy comes in like a flood this is the standard we lift up against him it's the word of god but god amen yes this is the way everything's been okay it's the way it's been for a long time but here now god is breaking in on a life and he's saying it's time for this lie to be put to an end because it's not the truth it's not the end of your usefulness it's not the end of the possibilities for the development of your relationship with almighty god and for fellowship to be found with him that's real and filled with joy and that's the gospel that's the way it goes you know as a as a man of god or a woman of god you you need to accept this that everything this is a big statement that everything um is is is um subject to and in some way a part of the sovereign god who has chosen you and will fulfill his purpose in your life as you surrender yourself to him and i i think the the big issue the difficult hurdle to get over is to really come to a point where i see and i understand and i dare to believe that everything that is everything um is is it was somehow to prepare me for this moment everything um and and that's wonderful you know the concept of the sovereignty of god it holds some features that baffle us and i know that there's contention out there that i'm very well aware of about how that works itself out but i keep saying and i'm not trying to be presumptuous or foolish but but in my heart i'm not a calvinist and i'm not an armenian and it's it can sound sort of pious but i mean this i'm a biblicist i believe the bible and if the bible says something i choose to believe it not because one lines up with it in a certain way or another lines up as another way we could talk about that for a long time but we want to the fact of the god being sovereign lies right at the heart of the scriptures and and we choose to believe it and yes there are issues and aspects of it that are difficult to sort of get our minds around and so on um listen to how the apostle paul puts it this is in that famous romans 8 28 verse and we know we know this he said that all things note the words that all things work together for the good to them that love god to them who are called according to his purpose he's not paul is not saying no everything's going to work out fine and you know life's going to be just peaches and cream for the whole journey and painless and no and the good that he's referring to is the good of the ultimate will and purpose of god that he has concerning your life and and the truth is that everything that is part and parcel of your life has been operating under the eye and sovereignty of god and he's moving you ever deeper and more fully into the his purpose which is purpose which paul will elsewhere call the eternal purpose of god amen you know the the the truth of god's sovereignty while it

does hold these baffling issues um let me say this there's one there's one thing that we cannot have we cannot embrace at all and that is a god who is half sovereign can't do that it's an oxymoron if god is sovereign he's completely sovereign and he's our god he's the god of the bible amen and he's he's managing everything he's been managing everything of my life his hand has been on me all the way through it doesn't mean i've lived right all the way through nor does it mean you have but if he's got you as it were excuse the expression in his cross hairs he's going to get you he's and the holy spirit i've often said he's like the hound of heaven he keeps pursuing and pursuing and pursuing and then one day he's got you got you completely and that's what's going on and and the the fact of everything working together and so on for according to his purpose that he has in his mind for my life and your life um that this this doesn't merely refer to um his his his design as though well it's a blueprint uh but it also involves something else which is his timetable um he times everything um i love that phrase back from um from the book of esther remember where such and such has been taking place and the statement has been put to her who knows if you have not been brought to the throne for such a time as this for such a time as this and i'm going to say to you who knows that god hasn't arranged that you'd be listening to this message here today and this poor man but you're sensing that god is speaking to you and that he's arranged the circumstances everything that has brought you to this moment you're here for such a time as this to hear this word from god amen and esther needed to know that that god had um he designed for her to be there at that point in time she needed to hear this that she was listening to at this point in time and then she needed the courage to act out what was part and parcel of that particular crisis moment and so on well honey said all of this look where paul was placed let me go that back there where we started in a sense and here's the wonderful thing he he was not enjoying freedom in this in the way that he'd enjoyed it before but he was enjoying the blessings of god that's the important thing let me read the verse to you it's right at the end of chapter 28 um and in verse 29 and when he had said these words the jews departed and had great reasoning among themselves it is and paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house and received all that came to him preaching the kingdom of god and teaching those things which concern the lord jesus christ with all confidence no man forbidding him how about that he wasn't enjoying the open road and the excitement of the cities that he visited and the meetings that he'd been very much a part of and so on but god had sovereignly placed him in that particular situation at that time i believe that in his sovereignty although paul might have looked back and he may not have looked back and thought was i stupid to do this or stupid to do that and so on but at the end of the day the answer to that really is irrelevant what is true is that god has overruled everything and brought him to this moment because i believe god wanted him right here where he is at this point in time and god's got you right there where you where he wants you or intends you to be at this moment no matter what it looks like you may not be enjoying all the sort of things that life can offer for us it may not be that your life's ministry is working out the way you kind of hoped or believed it would do but the fact is god's got you where he wants you and that's that's a wonderful truth to really get hold of and for paul this was a remarkable situation he's in his own Hyatt house yes there's a big disadvantage sitting next to him as a roman soldier and he's chained to the roman soldier so he's lost that kind of freedom and that's a pretty horrible thing humanly speaking of course but but hang on he was able to have his friends come there would be some from the from the local church the new fledgling church in rome but the others from the various areas where he'd been traveling from far and wide they they would come and they had the opportunity to gather with him and in those situations the apostle paul seized every opportunity i love the way the last verse reads that he was preaching the kingdom of god and teaching those things that concern the lord jesus christ hallelujah and you know some of these visiting companions some of them are mentioned as we reach around in his various letters and men like Epaphroditus or Tychicus or Onesimus for example these were significant individuals that we

read about elsewhere but they they came and they came from their respective areas from Philippi and from Ephesus and from Colossae and Onesimus he came uh from Philemon he was Philemon's slave and a lot more can be said about this but these people came and they were bringing reports of how god was moving in the various locations and one really amazing thing to me is this that the apostle paul who's okay he's in his own hired house but he's sitting there he's chained to a roman soldier they keep switching off in their various shifts um all of his private things have to be done in that kind of context now he's got friends coming in he's talking to them and fellowshiping with them and i think how in the world paul were you able to sit down and write the kind of letters that you wrote to the Philippians and the Ephesians and the Colossians and to Philemon and we know that he wrote each of those from that hired house where he was on that occasion how did you know the more i thought about i thought what kind of a mind does he got that god is using here that he's able to concentrate in such a manner that we've got these amazing amazing epistles here that we have but god was in the whole thing god had him there and of course right up to this very present moment and if the lord tarry is on into the future those letters were the product of his isolation and his captivity and look how they're continuing to bless the people of god everywhere even you and even me amen let me just as i draw to a close just say this i believe there was there was a yet another reason why god had paul there in that situation because i've mentioned already or at least i've alluded to the fact that all of our circumstances our present circumstances have been tailor-made for us by god and there was something else going on besides anything that i've just been talking about and and it was this that that god needed to have paul in such a posture of heart and disposition even in this complicated uncomfortable isolation god got him there and was able to do and accomplish in him an even deeper work in his heart what and that's what god's up to with you and with me he's looking to do something deeper this is like paul's priority was to go out preach this necessary vital gospel to everyone and god's saying well i need to do something more in you and this was the way god chose to do it reminds me of something i heard david wilkerson say a long long time ago now but he'd been preaching everywhere and then the lord closed things down for him without going into lots of detail and he spent six months he said i heard him right at the other end of this period and he said that god isolated him because and this is how he put he said god showed me that he god was more concerned about evangelizing me than he was that i should evangelize the world god's always looking to do a deeper work in my heart and in your heart and god knows where best he can accomplish that and under what circumstances would be most appropriate for him to have your attention in the way god leads it thinking of that i thought to a close by quoting charles wesley and charles wesley said now jesus let thy powerful death into my being come slay the old adam with thy breath the man of sin consume my old affections mortify nail to the cross my will daily and hourly bid me die or altogether kill oh let it now make haste to die the mortal wound receive so shall i live and yet not i but christ in me shall live amen so here we have here we have the apostle paul you know what he didn't know he didn't know that at the end of two years he'd be released without ever seeing nero were led to believe that during that period those jewish accusers they'd not followed him they were not there there was no one to give the kind of evidence that they wanted to give and so on and that's where luke decides to leave the story just leave it there some of us have wondered why perhaps but nevertheless that's the way it is that's the way it is and we must leave it there another great hymn writer of yesteryear said and all is right that seems most wrong if it be his sweet will god was working in paul god used him in a different role for those two years and paul this great heart uh he seized the opportunity that god gave him without complaint and he did a masterly job and we know that by reading what he wrote during that time but he was acquitted his accusers never showed up and his chains listen were his making amen and that's what you and i need to realize whatever the restrictions are there on us god is in control and is wanting to work something through these trying moments these questioning moments and accomplish something in our

lives that he knows he can only accomplish in this way amen chains may be but unique opportunities which are there to be seized if this talk has been a blessing to you do go to my youtube channel which is turn to the scriptures with fred tomlinson and maybe you'll subscribe and identify with me and what we're doing there may god bless you thank you

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