

**Pastor Jonna Bohigian**  
**Invitation in Chains**  
Acts 28:17- 31

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). When Jesus spoke these last words, it’s unlikely that his disciples had *any idea* what this would look like. Who would have *guessed* that they would speak in many languages in a single moment, that thousands would come to faith in a day, that healings would lead to trials and persecutions, that some would die untimely deaths, that the greatest persecutor would become the greatest evangelist, that Gentiles (*non-Jews*) would come to faith, and that imprisonment would mean opportunity?

Today, we enter the last chapter in our journey through Acts. Paul has been falsely accused and placed on trial. He is passed from one ruler to another, and finally, he appeals to Caesar. Paul knows that his own people will condemn him, but he *just might* stand a chance if his case is brought before the Supreme Court. He appeals to Caesar, and the rulers have no choice but to send him to Caesar, to Rome.

Paul is sent to Rome, and as you might expect, has an adventure along the way. His boat is shipwrecked and comes ashore to Malta. The people are amazed with Paul, and they think he’s a god. Paul cures many on the island, and the people furnish the supplies that are needed to sail for Rome.

Paul finally arrives in Rome. He stays there for two years, under the supervision of a soldier, to whom he is chained. Acts does not provide an explanation, but it seems likely that he stayed in Rome for two years because of a

backlog of cases.<sup>1</sup> The rest of Paul's life is not described Acts, but it's possible that Paul is later released, "imprisoned, condemned, and executed."<sup>2</sup>

In Rome, Paul assembles the Jewish leaders, and they are willing to listen to him. Some are convinced of the good news of Jesus, but others refuse to believe. They argue with one another and finally leave after Paul quotes from the prophet Isaiah. "Go to this people and say, 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.' For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them'" (Acts 28:26 – 27). *Therefore*, Paul says, salvation has been sent to the Gentiles.

Paul's many attempts to reach his own people have largely been met with resistance. Their hearts have been hardened; they do not listen.

But Acts doesn't finish there. Verses 30 and 31 say, "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." A terrific ending, which in fact, is even more terrific! In Greek, words of emphasis are placed at the beginning and end of the sentence, and the last word in the book of Acts, is "unhindered." Boldly, he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ, *unhindered!*

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<sup>1</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 472.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce, 511.

An *incredible* word of hope to close this *incredible* book! But how could Paul preach and teach unhindered, when he is bound in chains, awaiting trial? He *is* hindered; he can't go anywhere. People have to come to *him*. He has no privacy, chained by the wrist to a soldier day and night. He is *not* in a situation conducive to being unhindered! Or is he?

Many of us have heard the term "self-fulfilling prophecy." Self-fulfilling prophecy is when we expect something to happen, and we act in such a way that *makes* it happen. Paul could have looked at his situation and reasoned that nothing good could come from his time in chains, that he was just "wasting time" until he was able to have his case heard in court. He could have given up hope, thinking that he would never be released, or that no one would hear him because of his lowly station.

None of us would blame him, because we *sympathize* with his situation. We may not be in *physical* chains, but we are *metaphorically* chained to our homes and apartments. Vacations, monumental events like graduations and weddings, in-person education, large gatherings, the list seems endless – have all been canceled or *dramatically* changed. Employment has been lost, businesses closed, significant issues sometimes hidden from plain sight – like inequity and racism – have bubbled to the surface, and they have *rocked* us. Hundreds of thousands of people have died. Devastating fires have forced loved ones from their homes.

I have wondered when enough will finally be enough! It seemed like the other shoe dropped a long time ago. *When* will this terrible year *end*??

There is much to process and much to mourn. I am not unaffected by this, nor are you. There are *many* tears to be shed over the devastation of life, health, relationships, the earth, the brokenness *all* of creation is experiencing. Mourning has been an appropriate response – and it continues to be.

But it's also not the *only* response. It is tempting to wish this year away, to start over, to *bring on* the Pumpkin Spice Lattes because we need to hurry this year along! It is tempting to believe that *nothing good* could come from this year, and to despair, to waste away this time and remain immobilized in our homes.

If you have remained in this depressed state for more than two weeks, you find yourself crying often, unable to get out of bed, unable to find joy in what you once did, I *strongly* encourage you to seek a counselor. Counselors are needed more in this time than in a long time. In San Jose, we have a center called the Christian Counseling Center that we as pastors highly recommend to you.

If you are in this place, you are not alone. From personal experience, I can tell you that this process of opening yourself to counseling and help, can be life saving.

If you are *not* in this place, you have a different invitation. Oswald Chambers, in *My Utmost for His Highest*, wrote a devotion entitled “The Holy Suffering of the Saint.” In this devotion, he wrote, “No saint should ever dare to interfere with the lesson of suffering being taught in another saint’s life...If we accept the sympathy of another saint, our spontaneous feeling is, ‘God is dealing too harshly with me and making my life too difficult.’”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, August 10.

Perhaps in your desire to console and care for others, you *sympathize* with them, but never move *beyond* sympathy. Now, it is a great *gift* to be *understood* in your pain, to have someone *sit with you* in that pain. But, if there is no eventual movement *beyond* that pain, we are missing the invitation.

As Christians, we are people who seek the movement, the invitation of the Holy Spirit. *Where is God in this pain? What is my invitation because of this pain?* We know from Scripture that God is *not* absent, so where is He in this?

In a recent conversation with an aunt, we shared the experiences that shaped us since the last time we had seen each other. We had a lot to catch up on to cover a year! I shared with her about our miscarriage and the *long time* my body needed to recover. I found myself saying something that I had *never* before said out loud. Through tears, I told her that though I wouldn't wish to go through that experience again, nor wish anyone to experience miscarriage, I wouldn't wish my experience away. That pain shaped my character, and I am a better person because of it. I remembered the incredible closeness and intimacy of God's presence as I grieved. It was an intimacy I had longed for, and finally had been open to receive, after the miscarriage.

What I *didn't* share with her, because we weren't yet ready, was that I am pregnant. Somehow, in the midst of all of the chaos going on in the world, my body started functioning in a way that it never has! Without medication or treatment, we got pregnant! It's a boy.

Sometimes, our *perceived* hindrances are not hindrances at all...but invitations. Invitations to go deeper, to know ourselves – warts and all, to recognize

our incredible need for God and for one another, to be honest in our relationships, to love our family and neighbors, to understand and care for those who are marginalized, to place ourselves in a position of humble learning and service. As Chambers wrote, “God places His saints where they will bring the most glory to Him, and we are totally incapable of judging where that may be.”<sup>4</sup> *God places His saints where they will bring the most glory to Him, and we are totally incapable of judging where that may be.*

The pain, the chains you are experiencing, is an invitation. *Where is God in this?*

For Paul, God was *not* absent. God was *with* him in his chains. The Spirit *empowered* him to boldly preach and teach, unhindered! The Spirit brought people to *him*, from the ends of the earth, and opened their hearts to the gospel. Who knows how many of his guards came to faith as a result of Paul’s witness? We know from Paul’s letters that they talked about him; maybe they came to faith too?

And for you, God is *not* absent. The Spirit is *with* you, and is speaking and moving. Do you have eyes to see and ears to hear? What chain has been hindering you that God desires to use for His glory? What is the Spirit saying, and what are you going to do about it?

May God be glorified to the ends of the earth! And “may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13). Amen!

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<sup>4</sup> Chambers, August 10.