

Mission Unstoppable

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Date: 28 July 2024

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[0 : 00] In 2010, there was a lesser-known movie starring Denzel Washington and Chris Pine, and it was called Unstoppable.

Has anyone seen this movie? It's an old one. It's not a bad movie. It's about a runaway train that's headed for a town, and they have to try and stop it.

But like all Hollywood movies, well, not all, but a lot, it says that it's inspired by true events. Under the heading there. It's not even based on true events. It's only inspired by true events.

So it could have been, there was a train. But in Hollywood's defence, there was actually a runaway train in Ohio back in 2001, and it travelled uncontrolled for two hours, actually.

But today we come to a passage that would make for a great Hollywood movie, and it's about a runaway ship. But it's not a ship that's unstoppable.

[0 : 58] Unstoppable. A sandbar, as we'll see, does a good job of stopping the ship. Rather, it's God's word for God's mission that is unstoppable.

Now, again, like last week, it's a long reading, but it's worth hearing, I think. And so a bit like last week, we'll hear it all read, and then rather than working through verse by verse, which we often rightly do, I'll just pick out some big points, which I think Luke is trying to make.

There are no big speeches like last week, and so our readers won't all come up the front. They'll just come up one at a time. But they will follow the stages of Paul's journey, the stages.

And so it's an uneven reading because Luke records the stages to varying lengths. And as the readers read, notice how, two things, how Luke packs it full of details and packs it full of difficulties.

Keep an eye out for those two things. And so if you've got your Bibles there, please turn to page 1122, chapter 27, verse 1, and Ricky will read us the first stage, which is just the first five verses.

[2 : 09] Thanks, Ricky. When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment.

We boarded a ship from Adramitium, about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us.

The next day we landed at Sidon, and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. From there we put out to sea again, and passed to the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us.

When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and put us on board.

We made slow headway for many days, and had difficulty arriving off Sunidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the Lee of Crete, opposite Salmoni.

[3 : 35] We moved along the coast with difficulty, and came to a place called Fairhaven, near the town of Lycia. Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous, because by now it was after the Day of Atonement.

So Paul warned them, Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous, and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also.

But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot, and the owner of the ship. Since the harbour was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there.

This was a harbour in Crete, facing both south-west and north-west. When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity, so they weighed anchor, and sailed along the shore of Crete.

Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm, and could not head into the wind.

[4 : 43] So we gave way to it, and were driven along. As we passed to the lee of a small island, called Kauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, so the men hoisted it aboard.

Then they passed ropes under the ship itself, to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Sirtis, they lowered the sea anchor, and let the ship be driven along.

We took such a violent battering from the storm, the next day, they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard, with their own hands.

When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved. After they'd gone for a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said, Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete.

Then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost. Only the ship will be destroyed.

[5 : 56] Last night, an angel of the God to whom I belong, and whom I serve, stood before me and said, Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar, and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.

So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen, just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.

On the 14th night, we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight, the sailors sensed they were approaching land. They took soundings and found that the water was 120 feet deep.

A short time later, they took soundings again and found it was 90 feet deep. Fearing we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.

In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.

[7 : 10] So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away. Just before dawn, Paul urged them all to eat. For the last 14 days, he said, you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food.

You haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You will need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head. After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all.

Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether, there were 276 of us on board.

When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea. When the daylight came, they did not recognise the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach where they decided to run the ship aground if they could.

Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach.

[8 : 21] But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and wouldn't move. The stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping.

But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land.

The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way, everyone reached land safely. Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta.

The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold.

Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand.

[9 : 35] When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, This man must be a murderer. For though he escaped from the sea, the goddess, Justice, has not allowed him to live.

But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead.

But after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god. There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island.

He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery.

Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured.

[10 : 54] They honoured us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies that we needed. After three months, we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island.

It was an Alexandrian ship with a figurehead of twin gods, Castor and Pollux. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. From there, we set sail and arrived at Regium.

The next day, the south wind came up and on the following day, we reached Petoli. There, we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them and in this way, we came to Rome.

The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming and they travelled as far as Forum of Appius and the three taverns to meet us and at the sight of these people, Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself with a soldier to guard him. What a story. Well done to our readers.

[12 : 01] It's a long story but it's a dramatic story, isn't it? It would make for a great Hollywood movie, wouldn't it? But unlike the movie Unstoppable that I showed you before that is inspired by true events, what we're reading here are actual true events.

In other words, what this story we're reading, well it's a historical story which is point one on your outline. Luke claims to have been there and lived through these events.

Did you notice how he always wrote we did this or we did that? This is his eyewitness account and we can tell it's true by the way it's packed full of details.

One of the things I ask you to keep an eye out for. Details like lots of name places. We can see them on the map. I've given you an insert of a map there which follows Paul's journey.

The dotted line is where they're blown off course. But it's full of names that Luke mentions in this account. Places we can even visit still today.

[13 : 09] plus there's lots of names of people suggesting that Luke met them. Plus details of weather patterns like the Great Nor'Easter plus details about the ship like how the sailors sought to avoid the sandbars of Sirtus off the coast of Libya which historical sources tell us that sailors tried to do or how they tried to survive by first throwing cargo overboard which sailors often did back then and even how they tried to jump ship which sailors also did back then.

Plus there are details about numbers like the numbers of passengers 276 which is not unusual for a ship to carry in those days and numbers of days were at sea and on the island and so on.

The point is it's packed full of details isn't it? Which point to someone who was there. As one sailor and writer put it he said no man not a sailor could have written a narrative of a sea voyage so consistent with reality in all its parts unless he was actually there from actual observation.

And so another minister I know of was talking to a professor of history emeritus at King's College in London so pretty prestigious college her name is Professor Anne Duggan and he was talking to her and not a Christian and he asked her look do you believe that the books of the New Testament are historical sources and she said of course.

The conversation moved on so he didn't get a chance to kind of unpack that of course so he emailed her and her response said particularly with reference to Acts because he was looking at Acts and this is what she wrote she said Luke's writings conform to the structure of authentic historical writing he is careful to distinguish between what he learnt from others and what he witnessed himself which is what he does here he is careful to locate events in specific times and places which is what he does here he writes with an expressed purpose which is that we may know with certainty the things we've been taught that's at the start of his first book Luke's Gospel this is his second sequel which I take it has the same purpose and then she says these are the things historians look for and whether it's medieval history which is her area of expertise or ancient Roman history which is a time Luke was writing in and then she added at the end all pretty obvious really and the minister said thank you thank you very much in fact it's one of the things that separates

[15 : 43] Christianity from other religions that are often based in myth and just pure storytelling and it leads people to be able to have faith in Christianity in Jesus become Christians and so a guy who was a couple years behind me at Bible College his father was a Hindu and his mother was a Buddhist and so he knew a bit about other religions certainly those two but he obviously went to HTY camp because he was interested in a Christian girl and so the girl said to him well look you need to be a Christian so why don't you come to church and he did but he was so bored out of his brain he said that he went to count the bricks but it was painted like the walls behind me and so he couldn't and so instead he turned to the back of the Bible and often the Bibles have maps in them I'm not sure these ones do but they have maps in and he says this he says as I looked at the maps I started to realize that unlike any religious belief I'd counted before Christianity involved real places real dates real people and then he began to wonder maybe it's a real religion and long story short it led him to hearing the gospel really listening to it and becoming a

Christian he's now a minister in Singapore you see Christianity is not a myth it happened in history these are not inspired by true events these are actual true events and so we can have confidence in its reliability like other scripture and particularly the New Testament it's a historical story and secondly it's a theological story which is point two in other words it's about God that's what theology means the study of God the Greek word for God is theos so theology Luke wants us to see here God's hand which ensures God's mission that seems to be the big point here that God is able to keep his word to Paul for his mission in Rome no matter what that's why Luke packed this story full of difficulties I mean he could have just written our trip was dangerous but we made it to Rome the end it would have saved poor old Alison a whole lot of reading wouldn't it which she read really well but the reason

Luke packs it full of difficulties is so that we might see that God's hand is at work that nothing can stop him from keeping his word to Paul nor his mission for Paul in Rome you see as early as chapter nine in Acts Jesus says to Ananias when Paul became a Christian he says that this man Paul is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings as well as Israel Gentiles are non-Jews and what greater Gentile king was there at the time than the emperor of Rome Caesar himself and what better place was there to see the gospel go out to the ends of the world than the capital of the known world Rome itself and so the Lord Jesus said to Paul in chapter 23 which we saw a couple of weeks ago he says the Lord stood near Paul and said take courage as you have testified about me in

Jerusalem so you must also testify in Rome as Peter Young rightly pointed out a few weeks ago this promise to Paul here in chapter 23 really set the scene or sets the scene for the rest of the book of Acts although it was quite a journey to get to Rome wasn't it ever notice how in life nothing ever goes smoothly ever notice that or is that just me no it's you as well yeah how much less so was it for Paul humanly speaking he should not have made it to Rome I mean consider what he faced he faced the foolishness of people to start with like the captain the owner in verses 9 to 11 Paul had already seen that it was getting dangerous that it was past the day of atonement which means it's heading into winter so it's past October we're into November which is their winter normally when ships stop sailing and so it was pretty obvious to Paul that the voyage would be disastrous and yet the centurion listens to the pilot the captain and the owner who perhaps thought they knew better or more likely wanted their money they got a ship full of grain headed for

Rome they need to sell it what's more other history books tell us that the emperors are offered extra reward for captains and owners who sailed in dangerous seas to get the grain to Rome either way they foolishly set sail and so this meant for Paul for before very long he faced a huge storm with wind and rain like a hurricane and they were driven out to sea which then meant Paul faced death for we read later in verse 20 that without sun or stars to guide them he's lost at sea to the point that even Luke himself says that they gave up all hope of being saved they faced death but then one night as we heard an angel appears to Paul and the next day he says in verse 21 man you should have taken my advice before and not sailed from Crete then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss it kind of sounds like he's rubbing it in a bit doesn't it but he's not if he if his purpose was to rub it in he could have said it on the first day of the storm and the second day and the third day and kept going but rather he says it now at this point because he now wants them to listen to him he urges them to keep their courage because verse 23 an angel of the

[21 : 38] Lord appeared last night and told him verse 24 do not be afraid Paul you must stand trial before Caesar the emperor and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you so keep up your courage men for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me and yet despite this Pite being right before and now saying he's got a vision from God the sailors in verse 30 refuse to listen and try and mutiny they pretend that they're just going to put some anchors on the bow but really they're trying to escape and then he faces the shipwreck itself in verse 41 with the threat of being drowned by the surf and in verse 42 the threat of being murdered by the soldiers and when he finally makes it to shore on Malta he builds a fire and gets bitten by a viper are you serious and yet despite all this he makes it to

Rome by the end of our reading with his own home how on earth did he do this humanly speaking it's impossible isn't it but not divinely speaking for God is able to keep his word to Paul which is really about God's mission in Rome and to the ends of the earth you see his word to Paul and the reason he saved Paul is so that his gospel might be preached by Paul in other words God is able to keep his word and advance his mission even when it seems impossible I wonder if you recognize this music we got some sound what is it mission impossible okay I'll think it's blank what's it oh surely if we're like this music yeah mission impossible and you know the kind of idea of mission impossible don't you they get missions which are impossible but then it's made possible because it's

Tom Cruise okay nothing sees it of course it's just Hollywood but with the bad decisions and the storm it should have made Paul's journey to Rome impossible but it's made possible not because of Tom Cruise but because of God's hand you see it was mission possible in fact it was mission unstoppable and that's the point Luke is wanting to make here for God is able to keep his word for his mission so neither wind nor rain neither storm nor tempest neither mutinous ploys by sailors nor the murderous plots by soldiers neither the breaking of the ship in the surf nor the viper on the beach none of it could stop God keeping his word for his mission could it but why is God so bent on his mission moving forward well you know don't you so people might be saved in fact the word save comes up quite a bit in this part of Acts though it's not always translated sometimes translated safely for example and of course it refers to being saved from physical death because of storm or soldiers but the fact that Luke uses it so regularly and for him it's a really important word which talks about spiritual salvation

I wonder if he uses it so often here to remind us but the reason Paul is to testify in Rome is so that people might be saved from spiritual death because of our sin saved from hell God's mission is to see more people saved to build his church for his glory through his gospel being proclaimed and it's because God is able to keep his word for his mission that its mission unstoppable this is a historical story it's reliable this is a theological story God is able and this is an applicable story it is useful to teach us firstly it teaches us to have faith in God's word to us remember that's how Paul responded he said to the guys take courage for I have faith in God that it will happen just as his word told me

Paul has faith in God's word to him and he'll make it to Rome and we have seen we've got even more reason to have faith in God's word to us for as we've seen it's reliable and God is able to keep it no matter what of course God didn't promise us that we'll testify in Rome but he's given us lots of other promises in his word hasn't he things like that well known verse from John 3 16 that whoever believes in Jesus whom God gave will not perish but have eternal life their spirits will continue to live on in heaven and on the last day will have a new body for eternal life in a new world to come God is able to keep it and this word is reliable we've seen it and so if you're here this morning and you don't yet believe in Jesus then why not God's word is reliable it's woven into history and God is able to keep it and for us who do believe in

[27 : 37] Jesus God has promised us things in his word like his way to live is actually for our good and so we can believe that even when our world disagrees with that or God promises to work in all things for our good to make us like Jesus and we can believe that even when it's hard to see that because of the suffering we're going through in fact we can even believe that our ultimate good is to be like Christ not being healthy or wealthy I think that's the bit we find hardest to believe isn't it because we define good like the world does rather than what God does or God promises us eternal glory that will make any suffering we face now worth it and we can believe his word to us so that we can keep following Jesus through life's ups and downs until he brings us to that glory and so have faith in God's word to us for it is reliable and

God is able to keep it and second have confidence in God's mission for us for it's unstoppable you see we saw God's word to Paul in this passage is really about God's mission for Paul in Rome to keep speaking the good news of Jesus that more might be saved and as we've seen God's mission is unstoppable I don't know about you but I even I you know it's my job as a minister but even I find it hard to share the good news of Jesus because you know the nerves kind of take over a bit the heart starts pounding you're not sure exactly what to say and then sometimes when you say something you'll walk away and go oh I wish I had said that or this have you had that experience you kind of wish you did this or that said that or sometimes you might feel the gospel's not worthwhile sharing because when you have done it with your family and friends they're just not interested or worse they stubbornly refuse to look into the evidence when there's good evidence for it or perhaps you sometimes feel it's not worthwhile because the world seems to be against us did you hear about the opening ceremony in the

Olympic Games in Paris at one point apparently they decided to recreate Leonardo da Vinci's picture of the last supper with drag queens and so that's the picture above and Leonardo's picture below and one commentator wrote I'm not sure he's a Christian but American commentator wrote this is crazy opening your event by replacing Jesus and the disciples at the last supper with men in drag there are 2.4 billion Christians on earth and apparently the Olympics wanted to declare loudly to all of them right out of the gate not welcome they also raised the Olympic flag upside down so I think it was all a bit of a schmuzzle but it can feel like sharing the gospel is an uphill battle can't it that it's not worthwhile but this passage gives us confidence that it is for if God's hand is in it then no one can stop it not even the Olympics for his gospel will continue to go out and his church will continue to be built as

Jesus himself said from the kids talk I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it it won't die and so it's worthwhile getting on board with it I started with that train movie called unstoppable but eventually they did stop it so maybe they should call the movie eventually stoppable I don't know but God's mission is actually unstoppable because God's hand is in it and it's no runaway train that kills people it's the good news that saves people and so we can have confidence to get on board this train this mission to pray for people that's how we can get on board with pray for non-Christians to invite people to our meet Jesus Sundays in August or even our Christmas service at the end of the year yes I'm mentioning Christmas now because this year has gone so fast it'll be here before we know it and even to speak to people like if they bring up the opening ceremony you can say yeah I think it was actually more insulting to

Jesus than Christians after all Jesus died for them see what they say here's a historical story for it's reliable here's a theological story God is able and here's an applicable story it is useful for teaching us to have faith in God's word to us and have confidence in God's mission for us let's pray our gracious father we thank you for these actual events that we can read even today and so we thank you that it reminds us your word is reliable it shows us that you are able to keep your word and no matter what so help us in light of this to have confidence to have faith in your word to us and confidence for your mission for us we ask it in Jesus name amen