

The Unstoppable Lord Jesus

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 November 2020

Preacher: Andrew Price

- [0 : 0 0] Well, it'd be great if you could turn in your Bibles back to Acts chapter 12, if you've closed them. And today's passage is a great story, isn't it?
- There's opposition, there's rescue, there's comedy, there's triumph, and there's worms. Or maybe that just appeals to the little boy in me, but it would make a great Hollywood movie, wouldn't it?
- And yet what makes it a truly great story is that it's a historical event that teaches us the Lord Jesus, God's King of Psalm 2, is unstoppable, which means we as his church are undefeatable.
- Now, the early church needed to learn this lesson. Remember, the gospel is about to go global next week with the first major missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas.
- And that's why Jesus had called Paul back in chapter 9. So on your screens is a quick summary. He called Paul in chapter 9, verse 15, to take the gospel to the Gentiles.
- [1 : 1 3] But Paul doesn't actually go until next week in chapter 13. And in between are these lessons we've been looking at from Luke over the past few weeks.
- And today's lesson here in chapter 12 that will help them take the gospel global to the Gentiles, to the ends of the earth, is that Jesus is unstoppable.
- And they needed to learn this lesson because as they took the gospel to the ends of the earth, they would face opposition. And so point one on your outlines, verse one in your Bibles.
- It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval from Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.
- This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.
- [2 : 1 7] Now in the Bible, there are lots of Herods. It can get a bit confusing. This King Herod is Herod Agrippa, the first on your screens on the right.
- He was the grandson of Herod the Great, the one on the left. Herod the Great was the one who was ruling as king when Jesus was born and tried to kill Jesus.
- Well, his grandson Herod Agrippa is just as ruthless. But he was also quite partial to the Jews. It's why he arrested Peter, because it pleased the Jews.
- It's why he waits until after Passover before trying and killing Peter, so he doesn't offend the Jews. And it's probably why he persecuted the church and killed James in the first place for the Jews, who wanted the church dead.
- And what better way to kill off the church than to kill off its leaders, the apostles like Peter and James. Now, I also need to point out that there's another James in verse 17.

[3 : 24] And so you don't get confused. Verse 17, James is Jesus's brother who he grew up with at home with Joseph and Mary. But the James in verse 2 is the brother of John, and he is killed.

And so the church in Jerusalem faced real opposition, a real threat to its survival. And so we, too, face opposition in our day, don't we?

Last month on your screens, more Nigerian Christians were killed by Faluni attackers. And authorities took the bodies away without permission from the villagers.

And the villagers have said that the authorities still have not made any arrests in more than 10 years. Can you believe that? Or more and more house churches in China are closed and declared illegal by the Chinese Communist Party.

Or before COVID consumed our focus, you might remember this article on the next slide from the ABC last year, where no matter their belief in Australia, 70% of Australians, even atheists, agree there is religious discrimination in our country.

[4 : 58] In our state, we've lost scripture in schools. I used to run a Christmas assembly at a local primary school not far from here, but we're not allowed to anymore. And when stage four restrictions hit here in Melbourne, not that long ago, the government put out some guidelines for different businesses.

And do you know where they placed us? Well, on your slides, at the bottom of the list of other services, along with gambling, prostitutes, brothels and strip clubs.

That's what our government thinks of us. That's where they ranked us. Now, to be fair, things have gotten better a little. At the moment, cafes can have 20 people in their cafe, 10 per room.

But churches can't, no matter how big our churches are. You may have even heard one of our bishops pointing out this consistency on radio last week, I think it was.

And once the COVID crisis is over, my guess is persecution will start to slowly creep back in again, maybe not even slowly. Even by some who claim to be Christians persecuting us for our outdated beliefs.

[6 : 11] Like the religious Jews who persecuted their fellow countrymen in the early church. Opposition will come. It shouldn't surprise us, but it should drive us to prayer.

Verse 5. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. Like them, we're to pray, whether for rescue or relief, and certainly for God to grow the church.

And such prayer is not a waste of time. Why? Well, because the Lord Jesus is unstoppable. So point 2 on your screens, verse 6 in your Bibles.

The night before Herod was to bring Peter to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. Quick, get up, he said. And the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

[7 : 12] Then the angel said to him, put on your clothes and sandals, and Peter did so. Wrap your cloak around you and follow me, the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea what the angel was doing was really happening.

He thought he was just seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Now, notice a few things about this great story. Did you notice, firstly, how securely Peter was bound? Back in verse 4, he had four squads of four soldiers each, and they would take it in turns to guard Peter through the 12-hour watch of the night.

So four guards every three hours. And in verse 6, when they were on guard, it was likely that two soldiers either side of Peter were chained to either Peter's, both his arms or his legs.

And that's why Peter was sleeping between them. And then the other two were just outside the prison gate. This is maximum security, isn't it?

[8 : 25] And to help you picture it on your screens is a picture. Though we don't really know if the soldiers fell asleep or were somehow blinded.

Either way, the angel of the Lord Jesus appears behind locked and guarded gates. The chains fall off, Peter walks out past the guards, and the city gate just opens by itself.

The point is, this is a piece of cake for the angel of the Lord, isn't it? No chains, no gates, nor guards can stop him.

For the Lord is unstoppable. But this is no great escape, is it? It's a rescue. Because did you notice what Peter contributes to his rescue?

Absolutely nothing. I mean, he's completely passive. The bright light doesn't even wake him up. He needs a kick in the side to wake up. It's like me on the early mornings.

[9 : 27] I'm not a morning person. I need a kind of whack in the side to get up. But I don't then need to be told to get dressed. Peter is, though. Verse 8, put on your clothes. Don't forget your sandals, little Pete.

Wrap your cloak around you. Follow me. Peter is completely passive. In fact, in verse 9, he has no idea it's really happening.

It's not until verse 11, where we read that Peter came to himself and said, Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.

You see, the prison's security and Peter's passivity all highlight how it's the Lord who rescues.

He's the one who's unstoppable. He's the one who saves. It's kind of like how he saves us spiritually. Not from prison and execution, but from sin and eternal death.

[10 : 37] In fact, for Charles Wesley, what happened here in history is such a great picture of how Jesus saves us spiritually. He wrote a hymn about it.

The hymn, And Can It Be? I'm sure you know it. Here is a verse on your screens. You see, our spirit was bound in sin. And so we could do nothing to save ourselves.

But Jesus could. Jesus is the one who died in our place for our sin. He's the one who sends not his angel, but his spirit to wake us up that we might believe and follow him.

He's the one who rescues us from eternal death in hell for eternal life in heaven, the new creation. It's all the Lord Jesus.

If you're watching us this morning, we're very glad that you've tuned in. But if you're watching and you're not sure you're rescued from hell, then do pray, won't you?

[11 : 44] That Jesus might send his spirit and help you wake up and believe. And for us who do, then do keep praying for your loved ones.

That Christ might send his spirit to wake them up, that they might believe. Because this is the one rescue you don't want to miss out on. Well, after Peter realizes the Lord rescued him, he heads off to tell the church, who has a rather comical reaction.

Have a look at verse 12. When this had dawned on Peter, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.

Peter knocked at the outer entrance and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was overjoyed. So she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, Peter is at the door.

Rhoda is so excited, she forgets to even open the door. Peter has just fled prison. And at any moment, the guards might realize he's missing, sound the sirens and send the dogs.

[12 : 54] And they've left poor Pete outside, knocking at the door. Guys, can you let me in? It's quite comical. But so too is the church's reaction.

Do you see verse 15? The church replied to Rhoda, you're out of your mind, they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, it must be his angel.

But Peter kept on knocking. And when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Can you picture the situation? Rhoda comes in saying, Peter's out of prison.

He's at the door. And the church responds, don't be ridiculous. We're praying for him to get out of prison. You see the irony? And I wonder if we sometimes pray like that too.

You know, we pray, but don't really believe God can do something about it. Or when he does, we don't really realize it's his answer to our prayer.

[13 : 58] Because clearly the church didn't expect this answer to their prayer, did they? Maybe they thought God might change Herod's mind the next day. But God often answers our prayers His way to show that He's in control, not us.

What's more, God often answers our prayers at the last minute, doesn't He? I mean, Peter was in prison during the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover. That's seven days. And when was He rescued?

Well, verse 6, just the night before. God often leaves answers to our prayers to the last minute to force us to trust in Him.

That our faith and trust might be exercised and grow. If we had everything we wanted and asked for straight away, then we wouldn't keep trusting God.

And our faith wouldn't grow, would it? Either way, God answers prayers and here by rescuing Peter. Verse 17. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison.

[15 : 07] Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this, he said. And then he left for another place. In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter.

After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Well, here we've gone from a comical astonishment in the church to a not-so-comical commotion in the prison.

For Herod kills the guards instead. But did you notice in verse 17 how Peter again emphasizes it was the Lord who rescued him?

You see, the Lord is unstoppable. But does this mean then he will always rescue us from opposition? Well, no. After all, what happened to the first James back in verse 2?

He was killed. But Jesus will rescue some for whom he has more work to do. John and Margaret Patton were missionaries who landed in Aniwa Island, part of Vanuatu in 1866.

[16 : 22] Here they are on your screens. You've got to love John's beard. When they landed, the islanders actually practiced cannibalism. But over the next 15 years, they all became Christian.

Though not before John lost his wife and son. And at one time, John was surrounded by natives with a colleague and thought he would lose his life too.

But then he later wrote this about that experience. On your screens, he said, My peace came back to me like away from God. I realized that I was immortal till my master's work with me was done.

So not a club would strike us. Not a spear leave the hand in which it was held vibrating to be thrown. Not an arrow leave the bow or a killing stone the fingers. Without the permission of Jesus Christ.

Whose is all power in heaven and on earth. And restrains even the savage of the south seas. Great words, aren't they?

[17 : 29] John was ready to die. But then he realized if Jesus has more work for him to do on earth. Then it's as though he was immortal.

I was immortal till my master's work with me was done. Whether that work involves growing us more like Christ. Through adversity and the like.

Or working through us to bring others to Christ. We are immortal till our master's work with us is done. And so he may rescue us.

Or like James, he may bring us home to heaven. Either way, point one, opposition will come. Point two, but the Lord is unstoppable.

Therefore, point three, the church is undefeatable. Have a look at verse 19. The rest of verse 19. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there.

[18 : 27] He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon. They now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

Now on the appointed day, Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, this is the voice of a god, not a man.

Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died. Here are the worms.

That's a pretty gruesome way to go, isn't it? To be eaten alive by worms from the inside out. But this is what happened in history in 44 AD.

In fact, the Jewish historian Josephus, whose works I have with me here this morning, this is what he wrote on your screens about the incident. He said, Herod put on a garment made wholly of silver.

[19 : 33] Imagine that, the tail is trying to make a garment completely of silver. And of a contexture truly wonderful. And came into the theatre early that morning, at which time the silver of his garment, being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner.

And so was resplendent. His flatterers cried out, one from one place, another from another, though not for his good, that he was a god. And they added, Be merciful to us, for although we have revered you only as a man, yet shall we from now regard you as superior to mortal nature.

Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But a severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner.

And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life. It took five days for the worms to eat their way through, but what a way to go.

But you see, those who oppose God's church, those who think they're God, will be judged. This is a solemn warning for our leaders, just like the warning back in Psalm 2.

[20 : 49] Of course, it might not happen in our day, but it will certainly happen on the last day, when we all have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ. But the point is, no king or premier or leader can stop our Lord Jesus and his word growing his church.

So verse 24, But the word of God continued to spread and flourish. Actually, verse 24 really says on your screens, and more accurately, the word of God grew and multiplied.

You see, as we saw last week, it's God's word that grows God's church, as God's people, like Peter, proclaim it. But the point here is that, because the Lord Jesus is unstoppable, then his church is undefeatable.

Despite Herod's opposition, the church continued to grow. In fact, by the end of this account, there's a reversal. Did you notice? At the start, James was dead, Peter imprisoned, church persecuted, Herod triumphant.

But by the end, Herod is dead, Peter is free, the church grew, and Jesus is triumphant. For the Lord Jesus is unstoppable.

[22 : 13] That's the lesson. And we need to remember it as we seek to be Christians, here in Melbourne, or wherever you're tuning in from. As we seek to take the gospel global, because as I said, we will face opposition.

We already have, haven't we? And so for us, when opposition comes, then firstly, don't lose heart. Don't be fooled into thinking, we're fighting a losing battle. Yes, opposition will be hard.

It will sometimes hurt, and it will be unjust. But the Lord Jesus is unstoppable, which means we, his church, are undefeated. Well, no opposition can stop his word growing his church.

In fact, often opposition, God uses it to grow the church more. Take a look at this video. Some of the most intense persecution against Christians in China in decades is happening now.

According to China Aid, it may be the most opposition the church has faced since the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Speaking in an interview with Greg Musselman, a voice of the Martyrs Canada, China Aid's Bob Fu highlights how even the state-run churches are coming under attack.

[23 : 26] The government sanctions churches, some pastors, were even sentenced to 14 years, 17 years imprisonment for simply refusing to take down the cross from the rooftop of the church building.

And there are hundreds of thousands of church crosses were forcefully taken down, burned, destroyed, or some even totally leveled with bombs, I mean, dynamized by the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership of President Xi.

Fu cites another case of a church raid in Xiamen City in Fujian Province in southeastern China, where even parents face violent attacks in front of their children. The worst thing happened, I mean, occurred during the ruthless raid was, you know, some of their Christian parents were being beaten up, even in front of the infant children.

I mean, as you saw from the video, I mean, the mother was beaten up right in front of her infant baby. The baby was crying out helplessly.

And then you have one brother was even beaten so severely, several of his ribs were even broken, and he had to be sent to the hospital for surgeries. Fu concluded by sharing that despite this intense persecution, the church in China continues to grow at a remarkable rate.

[24 : 53] The number of Chinese Christians now had reached to 130 million. So that's 10% of China's population. By 2030, the number will be inevitably.

And if the persecution intensified, actually it will accelerate the growth. So the number will indefinitely reach to at least 224 million.

So China is destined to become the largest Christianized nation in really less than decades. So that only God, you know, can do that.

Peter Wooding for the Global News Alliance. Despite opposition, God can still grow the church, can't he? So when opposition comes, firstly, don't lose heart.

A second, do pray. Remember, opposition shouldn't surprise us, but it should drive us to prayer. For the unstoppable Lord Jesus answers our prayers.

[25 : 55] In his time, his way, yes, but he can rescue us if he has more work for us to do. But either way, he will grow his church in answer to our prayers.

And so, Kingdom Growth Night, our prayer night, next Wednesday, do come along. And thirdly and finally, do promote the word. For as we saw last week, and at the end of our passage this week, it's the word about Jesus through which the unstoppable Lord Jesus grows his church, isn't it?

And so we are to keep promoting the word, whether by supporting it, sharing it, or reading it ourselves. Last week, I put on our website under the resources section and some devotionals, YouTube devotionals in the book of Isaiah.

That's one way in which you can read it and promote the word and allow God to grow you. Or in terms of supporting it, one of our church members who is stuck in care accommodation at the moment rang me a month ago.

They received a quite a large lump sum of money, but they wanted to give quite a bit to the church and they wanted to know how best to do it. And so they're going to support a ministry apprentice next year entirely who will proclaim the word.

[27 : 14] Here's a way of supporting the word. Whether it's reading it, sharing it, or supporting it, we're not wasting our efforts to promote it because Jesus is unstoppable.

Well, some time ago, I saw this Hollywood movie on your screens called Unstoppable with Denzel Washington and Chris Pine. It's based on a true story in history about a runaway train where they have to stop it before it crashes into the city.

Now, spoiler alert, they do stop the train. But the great thing about the movie is not the outcome, it's how they got there. That's what makes it such a great story. But it's also what kind of makes the title incorrect, doesn't it?

Because the train is stopped. But Jesus ain't no train, is he? For despite Herod's opposition, Jesus is unstoppable.

And so his church is undefeatable. Therefore, when opposition comes, don't lose heart. Do pray and do promote his word. Let's pray.

[28 : 24] Our gracious heavenly Father, we thank you for this lesson in your word from Luke. We thank you for the reminder that Jesus is unstoppable and that it gives us great encouragement that when opposition and persecution comes, we do not need to lose heart, but rather do pray and do promote your word.

for Jesus will continue to grow his church no matter what. Help us to remember these things, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.