

The Unstoppable Gospel

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Preacher: Geoff Hall

[0 : 0 0] All right, you got your Bibles open, Acts, outlines. Alex was handing out outlines pretty relentlessly, wasn't he?

That's good. That's where the outline is. All right, are you ready? I'm ready. I'm not ready yet, actually. In my early 20s, I worked at the cinema.

It's a pretty good job. Lots of fun. Good people, good work, pretty good pay. And a free double ticket every week. Pretty nice.

Back then, I was part of a beach mission team. Anyone been on beach mission? Yeah, a few. A beach mission stays at a caravan park over a busy summer period, running activities for kids and teens and adults, telling the gospel to holiday makers.

If you've been on beach mission, you know it's pretty awesome and great opportunity. I loved the one I was on. I'd been on it for years. Months before mission, I told my boss about this commitment I had.

[1 : 1 1] I told him the dates and how much time I wanted off. But at the movies over summer, it was pretty busy and I was casual. My boss told me I couldn't have the time off.

But I was already committed to mission, so I kept coming back to present my case. Eventually, he said in a somewhat ambivalent manner, look, you can take the time.

You just may not have a job when you come back. I wonder if you've ever been caught between a rock and a hard place like this.

In today's passage, we're going to see a few groups of people who are a bit stuck. We've been working through Acts, haven't we? Let me just give a bit of context to start.

The early church here is in a bit of a euphoric moment, aren't they? There aren't zero problems. Sinners and opposition exist.

[2 : 1 2] But they also seem a bit untouchable. Thousands being added daily. Crowds coming from everywhere. And the power moving in and around the apostles.

It's just next level, isn't it? The key opposition to the church, the Jewish priests. They've had a few shots, haven't they?

Some warnings overnight lock-up. Some empty threats. We've seen that. But they're beginning to feel that this movement, that's getting out of hand.

They're gaining too much attention. The number of people being caught up. It's just ridiculous. Come on. Something needs to be done. And that's where we find ourselves in today's passage.

And it's not unlike the religious leaders when Jesus was attracting more crowds than them. Let's have a look at the start of the passage, verse 17. Then the high priest and all his associates who were members of the party of the Sadducees were filled with jealousy.

[3 : 1 8] They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. I know what we'll do, they say. We'll put an end to this nonsense. People are coming from everywhere to hear and see these followers of Jesus.

Let's remove the source of the problem. Oh, aha! You can see them, can't you? Rubbing their hands together because they've got a brilliant scheme. We'll get them in here, in front of us.

We'll intimidate them with our Roman guards and we'll force them to stop. Yes! Fallproof. But this is where they're a bit like Balaam, isn't it?

Blind to what's really happening. Let's keep reading from verse 19. During the night, an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.

Go stand in the temple courts and tell the people all about this new life. At daybreak, they entered the temple courts as they had been told and began to teach the people. When the high priests and the associates arrived and called the Sanhedrin, the full assembly of the elders of Israel and sent to the jail for the apostles.

[4 : 29] But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, we found the jail securely locked with the guards standing at the doors. When we opened them, we found no one inside.

On hearing this report, the captain of the guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to. Then someone came and said, look, the men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.

Back in 2007, an email appeared in my inbox.

Click this link to join Facebook. Facebook. What's that? Ignore. Can't be bothered.

A few days later, another email, same person. Ruth wants to be your Facebook friend. Different Ruth. No.

[5 : 35] Why do I want or need to be anyone's Facebook friend? Let it go, Ruth. Now, I don't know if she was deliberately sending invites or just spamming inboxes, but in your 20s and in the early days of Facebook, I wonder if any of you remember, it was impossible to resist the call.

The Jewish priests were so sure they could stand in the way of this growing movement, arrest them, put them in jail, stop them from speaking about Jesus. But there's more going on than they can see.

This isn't just a bunch of people having fun together, making a name for themselves, sharing the love. And it's more than just a new technology which years later has lost its shine.

They can't see that it's God at work. A jail isn't going to do anything. And do you notice that not even the threat of jail will slow them down?

Not only does the Lord open the jail, but when He tells them go back to the temple courts and keep proclaiming, do they hesitate for a moment? God is working all through this new church.

[6 : 58] The Jewish priests, once the people of God, are completely disempowered disempowered by God because they've missed the boat on God.

And now His new people. And so when someone reports to the guards and the priests, the apostles are back in the temple courts proclaiming rather than having run off.

Even when the officers bring them in, they too are disempowered, aren't they? Because they didn't use force out of fear of the people.

The priests and the guards have clearly lost their power. And it's when the apostles are finally standing before the Sanhedrin, we see who has the real power.

Let's pick it up in verse 27. The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest.

[8 : 04] We gave you scripted orders not to teach in his name, he said, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and determined to make us guilty of this man's blood. Do you find this amusing?

I kind of feel like they're saying, yes, we killed this man, but we told you not to tell everyone about it so they don't realize how terrible we are, but that's exactly what you're doing.

Now, I can imagine if any authority threatened me, let alone a ruling council, I'd quickly fall into line. To be completely honest, sometimes it's all I can do to drive normally when a cop car goes past.

You might remember a stage four lockdown when just sitting on a park bench was only for hardened criminals. Do you remember that? Back in 2020, the cops rolled past and in two seconds you're up, I'm exercising.

The apostles were dragged into court as repentant defenders. We gave you strict orders not to teach in his name, this name. They've got strong authorities breathing down their necks with a real desire to put a stop to their ministry.

[9 : 22] This is proper opposition. It's a bit like being between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, the Lord is telling them to keep proclaiming and on the other hand, the rulers are telling them to stop.

What will they do? What can they do? Do you know what they can't do?

Do you know what they can't do? Not teach in his name. Look at verse 29. Peter and the other apostles replied, we must obey God rather than human beings.

The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.

We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him. They may be up against the wall of opposition telling them to stop what God has commanded them to do but they will not stop because they must obey God rather than human beings.

[10 : 41] this ruling council pulls out all the stops don't they to put an end to this movement but it's the untrained we've seen followers of Jesus who hold all the power and no threats warnings even jail time can slow them down.

Excuse me. I wonder if you've ever felt that all the stops have been pulled out to inhibit gospel proclamation in your life.

For instance what you're allowed to say at work where or how or if you're allowed to teach the Bible whether you can meet to read the Bible at school how people even respond to you speaking about your faith.

Let me ask as the believer in those potential scenarios as the one with the Holy Spirit do you feel like you're the one with all the power?

Whatever power the priests felt they were not happy with the apostles response and they were ready to put them to death. But that wasn't what God wanted just yet.

[12 : 23] Enter Gamaliel Gamaliel the unexpected servant of God whose wisdom challenges the priests to think bigger. Let's pick it up from 34 war.

A Pharisee named Gamaliel a teacher of the law who was honoured by all the people stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered the men to be put outside for a little while. He addressed the Sanhedrin men of Israel consider carefully what you intend to do to these men.

Some time ago Judas appeared claiming to be somebody and about 400 men rallied to him. He was killed and all his followers were dispersed and it all came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt.

He too was killed and all his followers were scattered. Therefore in the present case I advise you leave these men alone let them go. For if their purpose or activity is of human origin it will fail.

But if it is from God you will not be able to stop these men you will only find yourselves fighting against God. I think this is one of the most encouraging speeches in the Bible and as far as I can tell it's given by an unbelieving Jew.

[13 : 42] Why is it encouraging? Because those who oppose us will realise they're fighting against God? No, probably not.

Because God will provide a wise counsellor who may not be Christian but will just at the right time stand up and stop the barrage of suffering and opposition. Yeah, unlikely.

Then why? Because we know without a doubt that those who oppose us, whoever they are, whatever they do, are fighting against God.

And today we have even more proof of the way God works powerfully for the growth of his church and for the glory of his name. When ignorant people, when people ignorant of God try to oppose him and try to oppose his people, we have even more proof than they did.

think about this. In just two chapters time in Acts, days or weeks, when the global Christian community is still only thousands, we're talking equivalent to or less than Doncaster, Christians, Doncaster Christians, that is.

[15 : 08] the global Christian community all together in one town, God basically squashes them. We'll see it in more detail in a few weeks, but essentially what happens is they are prevented from continuing to do ministry in the only way they knew how.

And not only did it not end the church, it wasn't the silver bullet of opposition, but it was what led to Jesus, chapter 1 verse 8 promise, you will be my witness.

The opposition that forced them to change the only ministry they knew led to the rest of the world getting the gospel including us. Gamaliel was right, wasn't he?

They were fighting against God even though they never knew it. And many who oppose us never will too. Sometimes choosing to proclaim the gospel really can feel like being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Yes, we want to make the gospel known and God has filled our lives with fertile grounds, lots of different opportunities to make him known, but opposers who are blind to God and to God's new and real and better life in Jesus have no care for our efforts and they are happy to pull out all the stops to squash Christianity and see Jesus and his followers become ancient history.

[16 : 49] And at times it feels like the world is pushing us out of all the places that we can proclaim, doesn't it? Doesn't it? it can feel like the world is doing everything it can to inhibit Christians in our mission.

Where do you feel like this is happening? Did you feel it when you saw the recent census data? Or maybe even more so when people kept mentioning the huge decrease in those who call themselves Christian being a sign of the world going to handbasket?

Maybe it was all the articles and tweets and discussion that followed celebrating the shrinking of the Christian church. Make way for the new world.

No more Christians, hooray. Perhaps you see it in public schools. Is this where gospel opposers are pulling out all the stops to inhibit the spread of the gospel?

No more or at least very little scripture in schools. The ministry and proclamation we've known for decades has just been ripped away.

[18 : 07] Perhaps you felt it this week with what was happening in the footy club that Victor mentioned at the start. Maybe you were really feeling it then. or maybe you think it's in here, in the church.

Organized religion has lost the plot. People aren't willing to say the truth anymore and we only get a lukewarm gospel. wherever you feel gospel opposers are squeezing the followers of Christ out of wherever they are, remember the encouragement of the wise camellial.

They will not be able to stop this. They are only fighting against God. when you see and feel this friends take heart because the spread of the gospel is unstoppable.

Just think for a moment about the next time you face or feel opposition, the next time you feel the squeeze, the time you find yourself worrying because it's not what it used to be, grieving what we've lost.

When you find yourself in that moment and it feels like the world is pushing you out of it, commanding you for the billionth time, keep your opinions to yourself. I want you to remember the apostles having just walked out of the Sanhedrin, flogged and with the same warning ringing in their ears.

[19 : 55] Look at verse 41. They left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they'd been counted worthy of suffering, disgrace for the name. Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

People are constantly trying to stop us from proclaiming Jesus' name. When they do, rejoice. It's proof that they aren't fighting against us but against God.

They might end our ministry practices as we know them. They might cease our evangelical tradition.

They might make Christianity illegal in Australia. wouldn't that feel like we were being squished out of existence. Friends, their opposition and persecution are to make us rejoice because they are fighting against God and we are worthy to suffer for his name.

what Acts and history has shown us is the heart of the world tries to squeeze out Christians by God's grace the more it produces them.

[21 : 25] The spread of the gospel is unstoppable. So when you're being opposed, rejoice that you've been counted worthy to suffer for Jesus' name and ask God for the courage to never stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

How about I do that now? Heavenly Father, we thank you for these amazing servants of the Lord Jesus who obey you rather than people even though they suffered greatly.

Thank you that you use them even through great opposition and persecution to bring the gospel to the world including us. Help us when we face any opposition not to despair but to rejoice and to keep boldly proclaiming Christ knowing that your gospel, your name and your glory will never fade.

Amen.