

## **ACTS**

Unstoppable  
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## **UNSTOPPABLE** **Acts 4:23-8:40**

If you have the Word of this God, and I hope you do, I'm going to invite you to open to Acts 4. In just a minute, we're going to pick up where we left off last week...Acts 4:23. We've got a lot of ground to cover. Going from the end of Acts 4 through Acts 8, we're going to read a lot of texts, but before we jump in, there's an assumption that is inherent in these verses that we're about to read that I want to make apparent in this room. The assumption in Acts 4 through 8 that undergirds everything here that I want to make sure is clear, if not assumed, in this room.

So, here it is. You might want to write it down at the top of your notes because it's going to drive everything. Here's the assumption: the purpose of your life as a Christian is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. That's the assumption. The purpose of your life as a Christian is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. The purpose of your life is not to attend church. The purpose of your life is not to have a good marriage. The purpose of your life is not to have a good family. The purpose of your life is not to have healthy, spiritual well-being. Now, all of those things are good, and they need to be present. We need to gather together with the church. We want good marriages. We want good families. We want healthy spiritual well-being, but all of those things are so that you might advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. The reason why we need good marriages is, ultimately, so that we can advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. We want the gospel to go to the end and that's the purpose. That's the purpose that's driving everything here.

What I want us to see is that...when that is the purpose of your life, advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth...when that's the purpose of your life, then nothing can stop you from accomplishing your purpose when that's your purpose, because that's God's purpose for you, and God can't be stopped. Robert Coleman wrote the classic on disciple-making in the last part of the 20th century, and he said this. He said, "World evangelism is the divinely ordered goal for all of us. Not only is it attainable. It is inevitable. Whether or not we believe it, someday the gospel of the Kingdom will be heard to the ends of the earth, Matthew 24:14. The God of the universe will not be defeated in His purpose."

Listen to this sentence. He said, "Any activity not in step with God's design for human destiny is an exercise in futility. The sooner we realize this and align our way with His, the sooner we will be relevant to eternity." In other words, anything we do that's not in line with God's purpose in humanity, in human destiny, is futility.

So, I want to urge us. I want to urge you, as individuals, families in this room, and to urge us as a church to give ourselves to that purpose, and in so doing, to know that we can't be stopped in the accomplishment of that purpose. Now, the world will try to stop us from advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth. Satan will try to stop us from advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth. He is doing that now. Satan is distracting us from that purpose. Satan is distracting people all across that room from that purpose. Isn't he? Satan is convincing us that there are more important things in life that we need to give our time

to, our energy to, our money to than the advancement of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

He will distract us. He will seek to divide us. Satan is, all the time, turning Christians inward toward each other, in conflict with each other. Satan desires to destroy us, and in so doing, keep us from accomplishing this purpose. Satan is, at this moment, attacking marriages all across this room. Many of you are in the middle of that. Satan is attacking families all across this room. There are battles raging around this room for holiness and purity right now, and many seem to be it feels like we are losing those battles. There are battles with materialism and consumerism raging around this room even battles that we are blinded to. We don't even see his battles. Satan: distracting, dividing, seeking to destroy.

What I want to show you, though, is that Satan's strategies are not new. They have been there since the very beginning of the church, and the church that couldn't be stopped then is the church that can't be stopped now, not when that's the purpose that drives everything.

So, what I want to do is look five prayers, and I want to show you five prayers that spring from...that I want us to pray together as a church...spring from the end of Acts 4 all the way through Acts 8. So, as we go through these chapters, I just want to pause along the way and say, "Let's pray this together as a people who have locked arms together." This is what it means to be the church. We have locked arms together in the accomplishment of that purpose. We want to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth.

So, I want us to pray these prayers together, this week, as we read through the end of Acts 4 all the way through Acts 8, just in our faith family as a whole. So, let's start in Acts 4:23. This is where we left off, and Bart walked us through some of this. I want to recap and then move into Acts 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Remember in Acts 4, Peter and John were brought before the ruling council and persecution of the church had now begun in the book of Acts. So "*they were released,*" Verse 23, and "they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

*And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed" - for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*

## O God, give us confidence in prayer.

All right. The first prayer I want us to pray together as a church and as a people who have locked arms together in the accomplishment of that purpose, advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth is "O God, give us confidence in prayer." This was mentioned this last week. I just want to make sure we don't miss it.

### We pray to ...

We pray to the One who is in control of the world. We pray to the one who is in control of the world. "*Sovereign Lord*" is how they start there in verse 24. Despot, absolute authority, we learned. This is Psalm 24:1, "*The earth is the Lord's and everything in.*" The world and all who live in it belong to the Lord. Psalm 22:27, "*dominion belongs to the Lord.*" He rules over all the nations.

Psalm 47:9, "*the kings of the earth belong to our God.*" Psalm 66:4, "*all the earth bows down to him,*" and the early church knew this. They knew that God was sovereign over everything. They talk about the cross here. They say, "You predestined this to take place. Herod, Pontius Pilate, these rulers who were conspiring against them, they were doing what your hand ordained for them to do." They knew that everything that was happening around them when they were being, now, persecuted and being threatened, and they knew that there wasn't one detail of what was occurring that was not under the sovereign control of God. This was foundational for them to know that nothing was going to happen to them except that which God allowed and God ordained.

There's a book I read awhile ago by a guy named Josef Tson, who was a pastor in Romania, in the midst of persecution in Romania. This book is called *Suffering, Martyrdom and Rewards in Heaven*, and it's basically a thick theology of suffering and persecution written out of the overflow of Scripture and his experiences in persecution and being interrogated and beaten and abused and held under house arrest and all sorts of things.

What he talks about is he talks about what got him through all the interrogations and the beatings and the abuses, and what got him through it all was the realization that these guys who were doing this and these soldiers that were doing this to him were only doing what God in His sovereignty ordained for them to do. Listen to what he writes. He recounts one time when he was being interrogated by six men, and he said to his interrogators, "'What is taking place here is not an encounter between you and me. This is an encounter between my God and me.' The interrogators looked puzzled."

Tson said, "My God is teaching me a lesson through you. I do not know what it is. Maybe He wants to teach me several lessons. I only know, sirs, that you will only do to me what God wants you to do to me, and you will not go one inch further because you are only an instrument of my God." To say to persecutors, "You're an instrument of God. This is something between God and me that He is allowing and ordaining..." Tson said, "Everyday I saw those six pompous men as nothing more than my Father's puppets."

I want us to think about this. For many in this room, following Christ will likely not involve interrogation and abuse and beatings. I say many, not necessarily most or all, because the reality is the more we as a faith family are intentional about engaging unreached people groups around the world with the gospel, the more that will become an ever present reality for some in this room. We'll talk about that more later, but the reality is many will not experience that, but we will face circumstances and things in our lives that we did not expect or would not have chosen. I want to remind you that, no matter what happens in

your life, that God is in control of every detail, and He's sovereign over it all, so that when cancer strikes, you know that cancer is not sovereign. That God is sovereign.

Cancer is merely an instrument in the hands of God that He will use to teach you and me to trust in Him, to lean on Him, to find strength in Him; that He will use to advance the gospel through you. That's the purpose. That's why that purpose is so fundamentally important. If the purpose of our lives is to advance the gospel, then we will gladly accept whatever comes our way and pray that God that will use that in our lives to advance the gospel.

The purpose of our lives is not good health. So, if we are disease-ridden all of our lives, then so be it, before a sovereign Lord, use it to advance the gospel. That's how we pray. There are other things that I know that are going on in your life or your family right now that you didn't plan or you wouldn't have expected or you would have never imagined the circumstance you find yourself in right now, but the beauty is, God is not surprised by your circumstance. He's sovereign over every detail in your circumstance, and He has sovereignly ordained it for this purpose, to advance the gospel through you.

We pray to the one who is never surprised by anything. He's in control of everything in the world, and here's the beauty: we pray to the One who is always faithful to His Word, so that when we walk through difficulty, through trial, through persecution or cancer or other circumstances, whatever it might be...sure, you and I, we don't know what is going to happen to us even this week...but we do know this: when we get in a confusing situation, we can ask God, and He has promised to give us all the wisdom we need, James 1:3. When we are anxious, He will give peace, Philippians 4. When we feel lonely, He will be with us, Matthew 28. When we are weak, He will be strong on our behalf, 2 Corinthians 12.

He will be faithful to His Word always. That's why Jesus said in John 15...you remember He said, *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you."* "Ask whatever you wish according to my Word." John 14, it said the same thing. "Whatever you ask in my name, I will give to you."

We have a God who is faithful to provide for His people what they need for the accomplishment of His purpose. That's the key. It's not, "Ask whatever you want." "Well I want a million dollar home. So, God you said whatever I ask, you give to me." No. It misses the whole point. If the purpose of your life is luxury in Birmingham, then yes, ask for that, but that's not the purpose of your life. The purpose of your life is the advancement of the gospel. So, ask God for the best place to live in Birmingham to advance His gospel. He will do it. He's faithful to His Word.

### **We pray for ...**

Now, this changes the way we pray, right? We're praying to the one who is in control of everything in the world and who is always faithful to His Word. We start to pray for the honor of Christ, which is what they pray for. You get to Acts 4:25, and they start quoting from Psalm 2, the psalm that talks about how the nations will come to Christ as His inheritance. That's what they're praying for.

They want the honor of Christ to be made known for the boldness of the church. Did you hear what they prayed? "Now Lord, look upon their threats and protect us." No. No, they don't pray that. They don't say, "Lord, look upon their threats and stop them from happening." No, they don't pray for the persecution to stop. Instead they pray, "Whatever happens, enable us in the middle of it all to speak with great boldness."

The honor of Christ and the boldness of the church and the advancement of the kingdom. You heal and perform signs and wonders in the name of Christ for the advancement of your kingdom in this world. So, how does this affect the way we pray? We've got teams, for example, from our midst who, over the next week or two, are going to inner city Atlanta. We've got a team going to the Middle East. We've got a team going to Southeast Asia. How do we pray for them? Do we pray for their safety? Do we pray that everything will go smooth on their trip? Now, I'm not going to say it is bad or wrong to pray for their safety or for a smooth trip. There's certainly no Scriptural prohibition against praying for these things, but I do want us to see that there is higher praying that we need to be doing. More than we want their safety, we want the honor of Christ and the advancement of the kingdom through them.

If that means that they are put in dangerous situations...not foolishly of course...but if they are put in dangerous situations under the sovereign hand of God, then so be it. "God, enable them to speak your Word with boldness in the middle of it and advance your kingdom in the middle of it. If that means everything on this trip goes wrong, then enable them to adjust to what your Spirit is doing and be used of you to advance the kingdom. You do whatever you desire, God, to advance your kingdom through them no matter what that cost."

That's a dangerous way to pray, isn't it? Not when the purpose of our lives is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth. It just makes sense. That changes the way we pray in Birmingham. What if the highest thing on your list of prayers in Birmingham should not be the comfort of your kids? Much higher than that is the advancement of the kingdom and more than ease in this life and protection and safety and security and all these things that we exalt, and we look to the world to find.

There are bigger things at stake here. We want the honor of Christ in Birmingham. We want the advancement of the kingdom in Birmingham, and that changes the way you pray. "So, God give us confidence in prayer. Help us to realize who we are praying to and help us to realize what you've told us to pray for. God, give us confidence in prayer."

## **O God, make us generous with possessions.**

Second, God make us generous with possessions. Acts 4:32, "*Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.*" Listen to verse 34,

*There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

John Calvin said about that paragraph, "We must have hearts that are harder than iron if we are not moved by the reading of this narrative." Did you catch what verse 32 said? "*No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own.*" What a statement!

### **We own nothing; Christ owns everything.**

Now, that is definitively not communist-driven socialism. That is gospel-driven sacrifice. It's brothers and sisters who realize that nothing they had belonged to them, and this is the realization that we need to come to as individuals and families and as a faith family in this room. We own nothing. Brother or sister in Christ, you own nothing; Christ owns everything. Everything.

Your house is not your house, and neither is your second or third house. Your car is not yours; your clothes, not yours. There is absolutely nothing in your bank account that is yours. Everything is His. When Jesus said in Luke 14:33, "*If anyone would come after me, he must give up everything this he has,*" what he meant in the original language of the New Testament was, "If any would come to me, he must give up everything he has." That's why you need me to bring about those kinds of revelations before you. Everything.

Nothing is yours. That changes the way you live. When you begin to think, "All right, if Christ was really in control of everything, then where would He have me live and what would He have me drive and how would He have me use this money?" That's when we come face to face with reality. It is His to use however He desires. It's not ours.

### **We give humbly.**

When we realize that, we begin to give humbly. There's no pride here, no competition for who can give most. This is not forced, guilt-driven giving. It's gospel-saturated, grace-driven giving. It's people who are united together in Christ, in the gospel, giving out of the overflow of their relationship with Christ to each other, so that, verse 34 says, "*There was not a needy person among them.*"

You might have a note in your Bible. If not, you might make a note. In Deuteronomy 15:4, God had said to His people in the Old Testament, "*There is to be no poor among you.*" That was God's design, and yet...we saw it as we read through the Old Testament all of last year...we saw injustice and oppression of the poor and exploiting the poor among the people of God, and the judgment of God coming upon them for that. He had said there's not to be any poor among you.

### **We give sacrificially.**

Then, when you get to the birth of early church, we see this statement, "Not one needy person among them." It's there because they're giving humbly to one another. The overflow of the reality that Christ owns it all in the first place is we give humbly, and we give sacrificially. People are selling land here. They're selling houses. They're giving sacrificially and extravagantly.

I want to camp out here long, but we don't have time. So, I'm going to wait until another day, but I want to you exhort you, encourage you to let this paragraph just soak in your heart and mind. Let's ask God to take this middle-upper class church in Birmingham, Alabama and show the world a radically different view of possessions. Let's ask God to do that in this church. Let's ask God to do that in churches all over the place just like this one. I read something this last week that said, "80 percent of the world's evangelical wealth is in North America, and that total represents way more than enough to fund the fulfillment of the Great Commission." He has given it to us. He has given it to us.

The question is, are we going to use it for this purpose, to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth, or are we going to throw it at all these other purposes? I'm convinced that materialism is one of the biggest hindrances to the accomplishment of the Great

Commission in our day. So, God do a work amongst us where humble, sacrificial, extravagant giving is all over the place.

### **We give honestly.**

Now, I want us to pray about what that might look like in the days ahead. So, we'll talk about that another day. We give humbly. We give sacrificially, and we give honestly. That's where Acts 5:1-11 comes in. We're not going to read it again, but you would think that when people die in the offering, it would hurt church attendance the next week. That's what you would think. People keeling over in the offering, you wouldn't expect this to be a good method for church growth, yet listen to this. After that passage, we read earlier, verse 12 says,

*Many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.*

### **O God, help us to live in purity.**

People were coming, and see this: the power of God was evident. It was evident because God was dealing seriously with the purity of His people. This is where I want to add in a prayer that I want to encourage you to put in your Bible somewhere. "O God, help us to live in purity."

I want you to see in Acts 5 that God is extremely concerned about the purity of His people. Just kind of come in here with me for a second. God hates sin in your life. He hates sin in your life and my life. He hates sin in the church, and sin, even the smallest sin, is so destructive. Remember Joshua 7...remember Achan? One sin amongst the entire people of God, just one sin, and everyone in the camp was affected. They tried to advance, and they couldn't because of one man's sin.

So, here we are. We want to be a people that are advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth. So, I say to you, do not harbor sin or hide secret sin in your life. Don't do it. For your own sake, don't do it. For the sake of everybody else in this room, don't do it, and if that is not enough, for the sake of people in this community who are lost and on their way to hell, and the gospel needs to advance to them, stop playing with sin.

"Oh God, may men who cannot get over pornographic addiction, may that not keep the gospel from advancing in Birmingham and to the ends of the earth." There are bigger things at stake here. This is not just about one person's sin. This is serious to God. "Now, purify your people. Help us to live in purity."

The beauty is, He has sent His Son to buy holiness for us. He's died on the cross. Let us not trample on the blood of Christ as if it means nothing or affects nothing. This is a gift that God has given us to walk in purity. Let's live in it, and in the process, let's experience this

power. We want to see His power at work, and yet, if we harbor sin in the camp, we'll miss it.

"God, help us to live in purity by your grace." None of us is perfect. All of us are prone to fail. I am at the front of that line. So, let us confess our sins to each other. Let us fight against sin with each other. Let us not grow casual in that battle because we want the power of God for the purpose of advancement of the gospel to the ends of the earth. "God, help us to live in purity." Two more prayers.

## **O God, grant us joy amidst persecution.**

Next, God grant us joy amidst persecution. Now, here's where it gets really interesting. I want us to read a good chunk here in Acts 5, starting with verse 17. Follow this, "*But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.*" So, they're put in prison.

*But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside." Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to.*

Where did these guys go? They were in prison. Where are they now?

"*And someone came and told them, 'Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.'*" You would think at this point, they would have gotten the hint that these guys couldn't be stopped. You put them behind bars and the next morning they will be doing exactly what you were trying to prevent them from doing, but what do they do?

*Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, [it's a great line], "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.*

*But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*

Is verse 41 not beautiful? "They were rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" and rejoicing that they had been counted worthy. This was not suffering for suffering's sake. This is a people who are identified with Christ, and in their identification with Christ, they are suffering for Christ's sake, and in so doing, they are joyful.

Josef Tson; listen to this story he tells. In Romania, he says,

I remember one Monday when two officers were interrogating me. About midday a general came into the room. He signaled with his hand for the other two to leave and he began to curse me and hit me, slapping my face and hitting my head with his fist, finally knocking my head against the wall. I screamed intentionally. I shouted so that the other detainees in nearby rooms would hear me. What the general was doing was clearly illegal. That of course, was why he had ordered the two other officers out of the room. He wanted no witnesses at my trial. He kept on for awhile and then left without another word. The two officers came back and resumed the interrogation as if nothing had happened.

That was a Monday.

So on Thursday afternoon the general returned. Again he motioned with his hand for the other two to leave. I braced myself for a second round of beatings. But the man sat down behind the desk and said, "Don't worry. This time I am calm. I have come to talk to you." Now the Lord has promised that when his people are questioned, the Holy Spirit within them would do the talking. I can testify to this truth. I myself was surprised as I said, "Mr. General, because you came to talk to me, I want, first of all, to apologize for what happened Monday." The general was surprised.

"Let me explain what I mean," I said. "On Tuesday, was kept here the whole day without being interrogated. I had plenty of time to think. All of a sudden, it dawned on me that this is Holy Week. And sir, for a Christian nothing is more beautiful than to suffer during the time his Savior and Lord suffered. When you beat me, you did me a great honor. I am sorry for shouting at you.

I should have thanked you for the most beautiful gift you could have ever given me. Since Tuesday I have been praying for you and your family." I saw the man choking. He didn't know what to say. He tried hard to swallow. And then said, "Well I shouldn't have done it. I am sorry. So let's talk."

We talked many days after that. And eventually he said, "Would you put on paper the things you are saying to me? I want the president of the country to read these things." From this I learned that no one, not even a communist, is beyond the reach of Calvary love. These are savable people, redeemable people, like anyone else. They desperately needed to see Christ in me.

So here's the question. Let me ask you this. Do you want people to see Christ in you? This is the audience participation part of our program. Do you want people to see Christ in you? Okay. That's good. If you want people to see a suffering Savior in you, then how will that be possible if everything always goes well for you? The reality is Christ will be most clearly displayed in our lives, not when things are going well, and we have all the things this world runs after...the world sees that brand of Christianity with religious attendance tacked on on Sunday and says, "It means nothing."

People, though, will sit up and take notice when you are stripped of the things of this world, when you walk through difficulty in this world, when you are not running after the things this world runs after, and in the middle of it you have the joy of Christ. So, are we prepared to embrace suffering in identification with Christ so that they will see Christ in us?

This is the story of the New Testament church here, and it only gets deeper in Acts 6. Verse 1 says,

*Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, [and these other guys.] They set before the apostles and they prayed and laid their hands on them.*

This is a picture of Satan attempting to divide the church, disrupt the church. It's, obviously, important in the church in the midst of persecution to care for one another, to care for needs in the church and to share ministry toward that end and to guard prayer and ministry of the Word.

This is totally a side note here, and I'm not sure exactly how to get into it besides just saying, if I could, I'd like to be just totally vulnerable with you for a second. This passage sums up a struggle in my own life, especially over the last few months. If I could just be totally honest with you, I as a pastor have been, over the last six months to a year, going at a pace that is simply not sustainable long term. A pace that is not healthy for my relationship with Christ, a pace that is not healthy for my relationship with my family, and a pace that is not healthy for my leadership in this church. I find myself doing a lot of different things, and, oftentimes, ministry of the Word gets pushed to all-nighters. Not a few Sundays either.

An all-nighter on Saturday night has led to Sunday trying to...and the ministry of the Word does not need to be relegated to the middle of the night because there are other things going on. So, I am in the process in my own life. I would just appreciate your prayers for me as I try to readjust a variety of things in my life in order to give myself to that which is most important. I'm making some big and small changes, whether it's pretty much, for the most part, getting rid of e-mail to a variety of other things, and it's my own fault because there are so many brothers and sisters in this faith family who can share some of the ministry responsibilities that I've been giving myself to.

I spent time talking about this with the elders the last time we met, and they were very encouraging. The reality is there are many meetings or issues or things that I've been walking through in different circumstances that other people could do far better than I could do. So, I'd appreciate your prayers for me in that and also your understanding in us looking, not to just one person or a few people to do what God has raised up an entire body to do as we grow together. The result here in Act 6:7 is what I pray for us, that "*the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem,*" because we are sharing ministry.

So anyway, thank you for your prayers in that. I want to love Christ well, and I want to love my family well, and I want to love this church well. I want steward any influence and trust beyond that for the spread of the gospel and the glory of God. So, I would just appreciate your prayers in how to prioritize that, which is most important.

So, Stephen is the man. In Acts 6:8, he's raised up,

*full of grace and power, doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

So, what happens is, Stephen's been accused of speaking against the Law and against the temple. So, in Acts 7, he begins a speech. We're not going to have time to read the whole speech, but from Acts 7:1 to verse 53, Stephen just plain brings it hot, and he says, "You think I'm blaspheming the Law? You've missed the whole point of the Law. It's been fulfilled in Christ. You think I'm blaspheming against the temple? Our God does not live in houses made by human hands. The temple? We are the temple. God has opened a way for man to be with him through Christ." So, he preaches the supremacy of Christ.

Listen to how they respond, verse 54,

*When they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said,*

*"Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.*

They pelted him with rocks until he died. *"And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep."*

The first martyr, at least that we know of. The first man to die in the name of Christ, and on that day, it became clear. It had been clear before this day that if you follow Christ you will be questioned. You may be interrogated, brought before leaders. You may be flogged, abused, but on that day, it became clear that if you follow Christ you may lose your life.

This is the story throughout the rest of this book. We will see people questioned and abused, stoned and beaten, and shipwrecked and beheaded. You cannot walk away from reading Acts 1-28 and think that advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth, fulfilling this purpose for our lives, will be easy. That is an impossible conclusion from reading this.

### **Our suffering is inevitable.**

It's why, when Paul gets to 2 Timothy 3:12, he says, *"Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* It's a given: our suffering. If our purpose is to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth, suffering is inevitable. It's inevitable. This is where I, pastorally, I want to speak tenderly, realistically to us, members of this church.

If we continue to pursue the advancement of the gospel to the ends of the earth, suffering will be inevitable in our midst. Yes, suffering in circumstances that God may bring here in Birmingham, and then, if we've got a thousand people every year going out in contexts around the world, the likelihood is some terrible things may happen in the eyes of the world at least. If we send teams to unreached people groups that have resisted the gospel, suffering will be inevitable. Even here in Birmingham on a different scale, but we go into this city proclaiming the gospel, the exclusivity of Jesus Christ, we will not be applauded by the world. Yes, if we just go give food and water and do different things like that, humanitarian needs, yes the world will applaud us, but if we do that and, in the middle of it, proclaim Jesus as the Christ, the world will hate us.

It's not my words, it's Jesus' words. *"The world will hate you because of me. I am sending you out,"* he said, *"like sheep among wolves."* When they persecute you...not if they persecute you but when they persecute you...here's what you do. It's Matthew 10, straight from Jesus' mouth. He said, in the middle of it, "Have no fear. Don't be afraid. Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul." Do you realize what Jesus just said there? Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. In other words, what's the worst thing they can do, kill you?

Is that encouraging to you? For me to say, "All right, we're going to go after the advancement of gospel to the ends of the earth, but don't worry. The worst thing that can happen to you is that you would die." How is that encouraging? Here is how it's encouraging: we who are involved in this mission, we're on a mission that not even death can stop.

### **Our mission is unstoppable.**

Our suffering is inevitable, and our mission is unstoppable. Not even death can stop us, brothers and sisters. Death is how the kingdom of Christ expands and spreads, right? Isn't this the cross?

### **Satan's strategies to stop the church will ultimately serve to spread the church.**

Stephen here, in Acts 7, what happens? Okay, so he's stoned. Listen to Acts 8:1, "*And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*" So, Stephen stoned, everybody scattering. "Oh no, this is not good." Oh, this is great. Look at Acts 8:4, "*Those who were scattered went about preaching the word,*" wherever they went. They thought the stoning of Stephen would squelch things. This just spread everything. The gospel had been stuck in Jerusalem in Acts 1-7. Now, the gospel is finally going into Samaria, and it's because of suffering and persecution. I love this. Mark this down. Satan's strategies to stop the church will only and ultimately serve to spread the church.

So, let's bring in Tson on this one. He wrote,

During an early interrogation, I had told an officer who was threatening to kill me, "Sir, let me explain how I see this issue. Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Here's how it works. You know that my sermons on tape have spread all over the country. If you kill me, those sermons will be sprinkled with my blood. Everyone will know I died for my preaching. And everyone who had a tape will pick it up and say, 'I'd better listen again to what this man preached because he really meant it. He sealed it with his life.' So sir, my sermons will speak ten times louder than before. I will actually rejoice in this supreme victory if you kill me." After I said this, the interrogator sent me home.

Another officer who was interrogating a pastor friend of mine told him, "We know that Mr. Tson would love to be a martyr, but we are not that foolish to fulfill his wish. [He writes], I stopped to consider the meaning of that statement. I remembered how, for many years, I had been afraid of dying. I had kept a low profile. Because I want so badly to live, I had wasted my life in inactivity. But now that I had placed my life on the altar and decided I was ready to die for the gospel, they were telling me they would not kill me. I could go wherever I wanted in the country and preach whatever I wanted, knowing I was safe. As long as I tried to save my life, I was losing it. Now that I was willing to lose it, I found it."

You cannot stop people who really believe that to live is Christ and to die is gain. You can't stop a people who believe that. "You let me live, I'm going to preach Christ everywhere. Kill me? Better: everlasting joy and spread of the gospel in my death." So, are we a people who believe that? Do we believe that to live is Christ and to die is gain? Therefore, are we a people who are willing to give whatever, whether its building or programs or this or that all the way down to our very lives? When we are, we will find ourselves amidst an unstoppable purpose.

## **O God, send us out in proclamation.**

God, give us joy amidst suffering and persecution, and finally, God send us out in proclamation. We're just going to fly through this one. We're not going to have time to read through the rest of Acts 8. You'll read through it this week, hopefully, as you're walking through the Word. God, send us out in proclamation.

### **The Holy Spirit will lead us.**

This chapter begins with these people who are scattered. They're preaching the Word wherever they went. The Holy Spirit will lead us. That's the beauty. The Holy Spirit's not just on one person here. The Holy Spirit's on all of them. They're preaching the Word as they go, and all of them are preaching the Word, and the Spirit of God is leading all of them.

This where we understand what we do on a Sunday in this room, right? We gather together for worship. We gather together around the Word as a community of faith to see His glory, to behold His glory, to hear from Him and be conformed into His image. Then, in just a few minutes, we're going to scatter. Today, from this place, 4000-plus people will scatter all over the city, and the design is that the Holy Spirit will lead us to preach the Word wherever we go. When that's happening, you cannot stop the spread of the gospel in Birmingham. Now, if the spread of the gospel in Birmingham is depending on getting them in here, yes, okay that's limited, but there are no limits out there when every single one of us is led by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit will lead us.

### **The Holy Spirit will empower us.**

The Holy Spirit will empower us. Oh, when you read Acts 8:9-25, you'll meet a guy named Simon who thought he could buy the power of the Spirit of God, who thought he could manufacture a movement of God, and that is not the case. There are, I think, some parallels there between ways we try to manufacture the movement of the Spirit of God. You trust Jesus; trust Jesus and the power of the Spirit of God is on you. You believe in Jesus. You proclaim Jesus, and the power of the Spirit is there.

### **The Holy Spirit will use us.**

The Holy Spirit will empower us, and the Holy Spirit will use us. You get to the end of the chapter, Acts 8:26-40, and the Holy Spirit just so happens to take Philip into the middle of a desert where it just so happens an Ethiopian eunuch and his chariot is riding by. It just so happens that the Ethiopian eunuch is reading from the Scriptures in the Old Testament; and it just so happens that that Scripture relates directly to his state in life; and it just so happens that Philip is there and is able to explain that Scripture to him; and it just so happens that once this man hears about Christ in the Scripture, he believes; and it just so happens that, right about that time, they come upon some water; and it just so happens that this man says, "Hey can we go down to the water so I can be baptized?" And they do. It just so happens that this man who believed is baptized, taken back up to the chariot; and it just so happens that, right after that, Philip is zapped away to go to another place. Don't you want "it just so happened" like that in your life?

This is where we realize that same Spirit that's on Philip and at work in Acts 8 is the same Spirit who's on you, and the same Spirit who is working in your life. Do you think it's an accident that you are working where you are working right now in Birmingham? Do you think it's an accident that you live where you live right now? Do you think it's an accident that you have relationships that you have? Do you think it's an accident? Nothing is an accident. He's got the whole thing rigged. The Spirit is on you to use you and me in the

same way. Lead us, empower us, and use us to advance the gospel of God. He has given us His very power and His presence to accomplish this purpose. What more could we want or imagine?

The Spirit will do this and use us to advance the gospel of God and, in the process, to show the greatness of God. We are weak people when it comes to the task of proclamation of the gospel. We think, "Oh, I'm just not prone to that. It doesn't come naturally to me." That's actually the way it's designed. It's designed that way so that you feel weak at every moment, and you need His power. Anything good that happens in you or through you can only be attributed to His glory. The picture is a people who, no matter what this life brings, no matter what circumstances they face, they are a people who have one purpose. We want to advance the gospel to the ends of the earth, and with that purpose, they run. No matter what comes their way, they know, if God is for them, nothing can stand against them, and because this is the purpose of God, they can live, and they can die accomplishing this purpose and know they will succeed.

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