

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 : 00] Would it be great if you could grab your Bibles and turn to Acts chapter 12, if you've closed them. We've got a bit of a fuller service today, but it's been really great to hear from the Jacksons, and it's been terrific to hear the Chessoms lead us in prayers. They did a great job, didn't they?

And today's story is also a great story, isn't it? I mean, there's opposition, there's rescue, there's comedy, there's triumph, and there's worms.

Maybe that just appeals to my little boy inside me, but this would make a great Hollywood movie, wouldn't it? And yet what makes it truly great is that it's actually a historical event that shows us the Lord Jesus, God's King from Psalm 2, is unstoppable, which means we as his church are undefeatable.

Now, the early church needed to learn this lesson. And remember, the gospel is about to go global next week with Paul's first major missionary journey.

And that's why Jesus called Paul. So on your screens there, he called Paul to go to the Gentiles to the ends of the earth in chapter 9, but he doesn't actually go until next week in chapter 13.

[1 : 27] And in between, we've had these lessons from Luke to help us as a church to take the gospel global. Lessons like chapter 9, Jesus still lives and gives life to all who believe, even Gentiles, as we pray, proclaim, pray, and partner.

And today, that Jesus is unstoppable. The church needs to learn this lesson today because as they, as we take the gospel global, we will face opposition.

So point 1 on the outline, verse 1 in your Bibles. Have a look there. 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 among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the festival 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 and execution after the Passover.

[2 : 34] Now, in the Bible, there are lots of Herods. This Herod is King Herod Agrippa I. He's the one on the right-hand side of your screen there.

He was the grandson of Herod the Great on the left. Herod the Great was the one who was around when Jesus was born and tried to kill Jesus. Well, his grandson is no less ruthless.

But his grandson liked the Jews. It's why he arrested Peter. Because it pleased the Jews. It's why he waits until after the Jewish Passover to put Peter on trial, 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. Because the Jews wanted the Christian church dead.

And what better way to kill the church than to kill its leaders, like James and Peter, who were apostles. I should also say that this James in verse 2 is a different James to the one we meet in verse 17, obviously.

[3 : 46] The one in verse 17 is Jesus' brother whom he grew up with. You know, at home with his parents, Mary and Joseph. But the James in verse 2, the one that is killed, is the brother of John.

The point is, the church in Jerusalem faced real opposition, didn't it? It had faced a threat to its survival. James is murdered, Peter arrested, Christians persecuted, and Herod triumphant.

All while their fellow Jews applauded. And yet, this shouldn't surprise us. As Jesus said, if the world hates me, it will hate you too.

And so we will face opposition in our day also. Last month on your screens, more Nigerian Christians were killed by Faluni attackers. And authorities took the bodies, yet the villagers say the authorities 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 here in Melbourne.

[5 : 06] You might remember this article from the ABC last year. Where no matter what people believed, even atheists agreed, about 70% of Australians agreed, there's religious discrimination in our country.

In our state, we've lost scripture from the school timetable in public schools. I used to run a Christmas assembly coming up around this time of year at a local primary school.

Not allowed to anymore. And when stage four restrictions kicked in a couple of months ago, I showed my Bible study group this. Do you know where the government placed us? Well, on your screens, last on the list with other services, along with gambling, prostitutes, brothels, and strip clubs.

That's where our government ranks us. Now, to be fair, it has gotten a bit better, sort of. At the moment, cafes can have 20 people indoors, 10 people per space.

But we're only allowed 10 people, no matter how big our church. One of our bishops was even on radio, I think, last week or the week before, pointing out the inconsistency of this.

[6 : 22] And once COVID has finished, my guess is persecution will slowly rise again. Perhaps not even slowly. Even by some who claim to be Christian, persecuting us for our outdated beliefs and so on.

Like the religious Jews who persecuted the early church. Opposition will come. And yet it shouldn't surprise us.

Rather, it should drive us to pray. Do you see verse 5? So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

Like them, we are to pray, whether for relief or rescue, and certainly for God to grow his church. And such prayer is not a waste of time, because the Lord Jesus is unstoppable.

So point to verse 6. In verse 6 we read, 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.

[7 : 35] 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. 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 that what the angel was doing was really happening.

He thought he was 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 here. Firstly, notice how securely Peter was bound. Back in verse 4, he had four squads of four soldiers each.

Each squad of four would take a three-hour shift through the 12-hour night watch. And in verse 6, When the four were on guard, two were chained to Peter.

[8 : 40] He had chains on his wrists, we're told. And each chain probably went to one of those soldiers beside him, which is why Peter was sleeping between them. And then the other two soldiers stood guard at the entrance.

This is maximum security prison, you see. To help you picture it on your screens is a picture.

Though we don't know if they 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 right past the oblivious guards. And the outer gate opens automatically.

In other words, this is a piece of cake. For the Lord's angel. No chains, nor guards, nor gates can stop him.

The point is, the Lord is unstoppable. But this is no great escape, is it? It's actually a rescue.

[9 : 43] Because did you notice what Peter contributes to it? Absolutely nothing. Peter is completely passive.

The bright light doesn't even wake him up. He has to get kicked in the side to wake him up. Now, I'm not a morning person, so I can kind of relate to that. I find it very hard to wake up in the morning. I can do with a kick in the side.

But I certainly don't need to be told then to get dressed. But verse 8, Peter is told, Peter is completely passive, isn't he?

In fact, verse 9, he has no idea it's real. It's not until verse 11 where we read this. Then 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.

The Lord has rescued me. You see, the prison's security, Peter's passivity, if you like, all highlight how it's the Lord who rescues.

[10:59] He's the one who's unstoppable. He's the one who saves. Just like how he saves us. And not from prison and execution, but from sin and eternal death.

In fact, Charles Wesley, for him, what happened here in history was such a great picture of how Jesus saves us spiritually that he wrote a hymn about it.

The hymn called And Can It Be? Verses on your screens. Because our spirit was imprisoned, bound in sin.

And nothing we could do could save ourselves. But Jesus did. He is the one who died in our place for our sins.

He's the one who sent not his angel, but his spirit to wake us up that we might believe and follow him. It's all the Lord Jesus who rescues us from eternal death in hell for eternal life in heaven.

[12:09] And then the new creation. If you're watching and you're not sure that you've been rescued from hell, then firstly, thank you so much for tuning in.

But then do pray that Jesus might send his spirit to help you wake up and believe. And for us who do, then do keep praying for your loved ones that Jesus might send his spirit to wake them up, that they might believe.

Because there's this one rescue that 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.

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

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

[13:21] Rhoda's so excited, she forgets to open the door, doesn't she? And poor Peter, he's just fled prison. And at any moment, the guards might realize, sound the alarm, send the dogs, all while he's left outside exposed and still knocking.

Guys, let me in. Anyone there? It's not just Rhoda's reaction that's comical. It's also the church's. Have a look at verse 15.

The church replied, you're out of your mind, they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, oh, 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 is out of prison.

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

[14:29] And we pray, but don't really believe something will happen. Or when it does, we don't really realize it's God's answer. Because clearly the church didn't expect this sort of answer.

Maybe they thought God might change Herod's mind the next morning. But God often answers our prayers his way to remind us he's in control, not us.

But he also often answers our prayers at the last minute, doesn't he? I mean, Peter had been in prison during the festival, remember, which goes seven, eight days.

And when is he rescued? Well, back in verse six, just the night before. Yet God often leaves it to the last minute to force us to trust him.

To force us to exercise our faith in him that it might grow. I mean, if we got everything sorted out straight away, then we'd stop trusting, wouldn't we?

[15:31] And our faith wouldn't grow, would it? Either way, God answers our prayers. And here, by rescuing Peter, look at verse 17 and 18. Then Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison.

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 or disturbance 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, we've gone from a comical astonishment in the church to a not-so-comical commotion in the prison.

Because Herod kills the guards, doesn't he? But did you notice again how Peter emphasized in verse 17 that it was the Lord who rescues?

You see, the Lord is unstoppable. So does this mean that he will always rescue us from opposition?

Well, no. After all, what happened to James back in verse 2?

[16:45] 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.

Here's a picture of them on your screens. You've got to love John's beard. When they landed, the islanders 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 and thought he and his colleague were lost too. And then reflecting on that situation, this is what he wrote about that time.

He said, They're great words, aren't they?

John was ready to die. But then he realized that if Jesus had more work for him to do, then it was as though he was immortal. Because Jesus is unstoppable, you see.

[18:20] I was immortal till my master's work with me was done. Whether that work involves growing us more like Christ, or working through us to bring others to Christ.

We are immortal till our master's work with us is done. So he may, if that's the case, rescue us. Or like James, he may bring us home to heaven.

But either way, opposition will come, point one. Then, but the Lord is unstoppable, point two. All of which thou means the church is undefeatable, point three.

Have a look at verse 19 to 23. The rest of verse 19. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there. He'd 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 King Herod's country for their food supply.

[19:27] And so on the day appointed Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. And they shouted, this is the voice of God, of a God, not of 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. It's pretty gruesome, isn't it?

To be eaten by worms from the inside out. And yet this is what actually happened in history, 44 AD. In fact, a Jewish historian called Josephus, whose works I have here this morning.

This is what he writes about that very event. On the screen, Herod put on a garment made wholly of silver and of a contexture truly wonderful and came into the theatre early in the morning, at which time the silver of his garment, being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out in a surprising manner.

And it was so resplendent. His flatterers cried out, one from one place and 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.

[20:53] 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'd been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life. That's how long the worms took, five days.

But you see, this actually happened in history. Those who oppose God's church or think their God will be judged.

It's a solemn warning for our leaders, like the warning we heard from Psalm 2. Of course, it might not be in our day, but they will certainly be judged on the last day, when we all have to give an account 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.

[22 : 01] You see verse 24? But the word of God continued to spread and flourish. Actually, literally, it says on your screens, the word of God grew and multiplied.

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, didn't it? In fact, by the end of this account, there's actually a reversal. At the start, James was dead, Peter imprisoned, the church persecuted, Herod triumphant.

By the end, Herod is dead, Peter is free, the church grew, and Jesus is triumphant.

For the Lord Jesus is unstoppable. That's the lesson. And we need to remember it as we seek to be Christians and take the gospel global in our time, wherever we are.

[23 : 12] Because as I said, we too will face opposition. We already have. And so for us, when opposition comes, then firstly, don't lose heart.

Don't think we're fighting a losing battle. Yes, opposition is hard and will sometimes hurt and it will be unjust. But the Lord Jesus is unstoppable, which means we, his church, are undefeatable.

No opposition can stop his word growing his church. In fact, often opposition and persecution is used 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.

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.

[24 : 30] And there are hundreds of thousands of church crosses were forcefully taken down, burnt, destroyed, or some even totally leveled with bombs, I mean dynamised 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 that 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 surgery.

Fu concluded by sharing that despite this intense persecution, the church in China continues to grow at a remarkable rate. 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.

[26 : 01] 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 a decade.

So that only God can do that. Peter Wooding for the Global News Alliance. You see, even despite opposition, Jesus will still grow his church.

And so when opposition comes, then there's no need to lose heart. Rather, second, do pray.

Remember, opposition shouldn't surprise us, but it should drive us to prayer.

For the unstoppable Lord Jesus answers our prayers, as we saw. Not always in the way we expect, but his way in his time. And so do pray.

Our Kingdom Growth Prayer Night is this Wednesday. And thirdly, 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 keeps growing his church.

[27 : 08] And so whether it's by supporting it or sharing it or reading the word, we're to promote it. So, for example, last week I put on the resource page of our website, 10 Minute Devotionals on YouTube, in the book of Isaiah, to help you read the word.

That's one way of promoting in your own lives, that you might grow more like Christ. Or another member from our church, who's currently stuck in a care facility at the moment, rang me last month and they received a lump sum of money and wanted to know how they could use it by giving it to the church.

And so they're going to fund a ministry apprentice next year who will proclaim the word. That's a way of supporting the word. Whether it's reading it, sharing it or supporting it, we're not wasting our time in promoting it.

For 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.

Now, spoiler alert, they do stop the train. But that's not what makes the movie great. It's how they do it. It's the journey. So I'm not spoiling the movie, I don't think.

[28 : 28] But the fact that they stop the train kind of makes the title incorrect, doesn't it? The title of the movie is Unstoppable, but the train stops. But unlike the train, Jesus is unstoppable.

For despite Herod's best efforts, the church keeps growing. The church is undefeatable. And so when opposition comes, don't lose heart.

Do pray and do keep promoting the word. Let's pray now. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for this encouraging reminder this morning that the Lord Jesus is unstoppable.

And therefore, no matter what opposition we face, your church is undefeatable. Help us, we pray in this, that we might be bold to take the opportunities we have to share this word with others.

That we might keep praying for your church. And that we will not lose heart when opposition comes. Help us in these things, we pray in Jesus' name.

[29 : 39] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.