

The Unstoppable Church

Acts 5:33-42

Rev. Brian Bill

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Video: Spread of Christianity

As I watched that video my mind immediately went to the words of Jesus found in Matthew 16:18. Using the word “**church**” for the first time, Jesus made this unchanging, unwavering and glorious promise: “***I will build my church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.***” Jesus will do the building and He calls the church “***my church.***” This is not your church or my church; it is the church of Jesus Christ and He alone is the One building it.

I’m reminded of the lyrics to “A Mighty Fortress is our God.”

*For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and pow'r are great, and, armed with cruel hate...
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.*

Last weekend we shared some stats and stories about the persecuted church and established *it's always better to obey God*. Today we're celebrating the unstoppable church as we discover how *God uses people and problems to accomplish His purposes*.

Check out these stats (I'm grateful for the extensive research help from EBC member Aaron Langworthy):

- Christianity is growing faster than the population rate and followers of Jesus outnumber every other faith.
- The center of Christianity has moved to the global south with exploding growth rates in Asia and Africa. The Christian community in Latin America and Africa accounts for one billion people!
- One out of four Christians in the world is an African, and Pew Research estimates this will grow to 40% by 2030. By 2060, six of the countries with the top ten largest Christian populations will be in Africa. The size of the Christian population in Nigeria alone – already the largest on the continent – is projected to double in 40 years.

- 19 of the top 20 countries where the church is growing the fastest are in Asia and Africa.
- We continue to hear reports of explosive church growth in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries. Operation World reports that due to prayer, increased Bible distribution, disillusionment with Islam, use of media, along with persecution, the church in Iran is the “*fastest growing in the world.*”
- There are an estimated 100 million followers of Christ in China. Some church growth experts estimate there are more Christians in China than in the United States. I’ve also heard there are more Christians than members of the Communist party in China. One of our Go Team partners is Keep Believing Ministries, led by Ray Pritchard. KBM has a strong presence in China through a Mandarin language website hosting Ray’s sermons and Anchor for the Soul.

Speaking of China, I read a very moving letter this week from a pastor in Wuhan, China. As you may know, this city of 11 million is ground zero for the coronavirus. For the sake of time, I’ll only be able to quote a small portion. If you’d like to read the entire letter, and I encourage you to do so, there are paper copies on top of the Resource Kiosk, and it will also be posted on the Sermon Extras tab on the Edgewood app and website.

Brothers and sisters, peace be upon you:

During these past days the Wuhan pneumonia [virus] has been at the center of my thoughts and life. [I am] always watching the latest news, and always thinking about how our family and the church should face this.

As for family, I have gathered masks and foodstuffs and have ventured out of doors as little as possible. When venturing out in public I have worn a mask, but as for the rest, I have placed it in the Lord’s hands.

As for the church, the safety of the congregation, a faithful witness, the possibility that members could contract the illness, have all become a great area of struggle. It is readily apparent that we are facing a test of our faith. The situation is so critical, yet [we are] trusting in the Lord’s promises, that his thoughts toward us are of peace, and not evil (Jeremiah. 29:11), and that he allows for a time of testing, not to destroy us, but to establish us...

Therefore, Christians are not only to suffer with the people of this city, but we have a responsibility to pray for those in this city who are fearful, and to bring to them the peace of Christ...

Wuhan's pestilence cannot separate us from the love of Christ; this love is in our Lord Jesus Christ... We have a part in his sufferings, and we have a part in his glory, all of Christ's is ours, and our all is Christ's. Therefore, Christ is with us as we face the pestilence in this city... If we die in the pestilence, it is an opportunity to witness to Christ, and even more to enter into his glory...

All that we are experiencing, is it not like Abraham facing Sodom, and Jonah facing Nineveh? If God, because of a righteous man withheld judgment on Sodom, or because of 120,000 who didn't know their left hand from their right, withheld destruction, what of the city of Wuhan in which we live? We are clearly the righteous in this city, far more than a single righteous person there are thousands and thousands of us... We are this city's Abraham and Jonah. We must pray for God's mercy upon this city and bring peace upon this city through our prayers and testimony.

If you do not feel a responsibility to pray, ask the Lord for a loving soul, an earnestly prayerful heart; if you are not crying, ask the Lord for tears. Because we surely know that only through the hope of the Lord's mercy will this city be saved.

Pray for Wuhan

Listen now to the story of God's glory as He builds His church in the Book of Acts...

Jesus gave them, and us, a command in Acts 1:8: ***“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”***

In the early chapters of Acts, the gospel message penetrated and saturated the city of Jerusalem. In fact, as we heard last week from Acts 5:28, the enemies say they had ***“filled Jerusalem”*** with the teaching about Jesus. Acts 2:41 reports ***“three thousand souls”*** were saved on Pentecost. Acts 2:47 says ***“the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”*** Acts 4:4 states, ***“But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men***

came to about five thousand.” Acts 5:14 adds, “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”

Acts 8:1-4 shows how persecution ended up propelling the Christians to take the gospel outside of Jerusalem: *“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...Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”* It was Tertullian who said: *“Kill us, torture us, grind us to the dust. The more you mow us down, the more we grow. The seed is the blood of Christians.”*

In subsequent chapters in Acts, the gospel spreads to other lands as Paul takes three missionary journeys and one final trip to Rome.

The explosive growth of the church led to various reactions from the religious authorities. We’ll see three reactions and two responses in Acts 5:17-32 as *God uses people and problems to accomplish His purposes.*

Reactions

After Peter declared the apostles’ commitment to obey God rather than man, he laid the responsibility for the death of Jesus at the leaders’ feet while challenging them to repent.

1. Startlingly hateful. The first reaction is startlingly hateful in verse 33: *“When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.”* The word *“enraged”* is quite colorful. It means, *“to cut asunder with a saw.”* These leaders were ripped apart as if a sword had sliced through their hearts. Instead of being convicted they were committed to *“kill”* them, which means, *“to slay or execute.”*

2. Surprisingly helpful. The second reaction is surprisingly helpful. Listen to verse 34: *“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.”* Last weekend we learned the majority of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, was made up of Sadducees. Actually, there were also a few Pharisees on the council. Among the minority party was a man named Gamaliel. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, wrote that the Sadducees would often give in to the demands of the Pharisees because of their popularity with the people.

Gamaliel later served as the president of the Sanhedrin for 32 years. He was a Scripture scholar and was **“held in honor,”** which means he was highly esteemed and treasured by everyone. In the Mishnah, which is a commentary on the Torah, we read these words: *“When Gamaliel died, the glory of the Torah ceased, and purity and sanctity died out also.”* He was the first teacher to be given the title *“Rabban,”* meaning *“our teacher.”* Acts 22:3 tells us he became the tutor for the Apostle Paul.

God has always used people and problems to accomplish His purposes. For Joseph, he used Pharaoh. With Daniel, He used Nebuchadnezzar. God raised up King Cyrus and Artaxerxes to allow the Jews to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He even used a donkey to get His message across. And He used Gamaliel to deliver the apostles from almost certain execution.

In our context, it would be as if Pastor Brown, who served faithfully here for 44 years, stood up in a service and started speaking – we’d all pay attention and I’d love it. I’d take a seat and let him preach! Gamaliel stood up with a commanding voice and ordered the apostles to go outside for a while so they could talk candidly among themselves. In verse 35 he gives them a warning: **“Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men.”** To **“take care”** has the idea of *“paying attention and giving heed.”* In essence, he’s saying, *“Hold on. Not so fast.”*

He then illustrates his warning by giving two historical examples of men who started strong only to flame out.

- **Theudas.** The first is found in verse 36: **“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.”** He boasted about being a great guy and a number of followers aligned themselves with him. The word **“dispersed”** has the idea of *“breaking up and going to pieces.”* Like David Koresh and his Branch Davidians, they were all dispersed and disappeared.
- **Judas.** The second leader is described in verse 37: **“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.”** This is obviously a different Judas than the one mentioned in the gospels. This guy complained and revolted against the census because it

meant more taxes. He was able to gather followers but after he died, they all scattered as well.

After making the point that these famous guys and their followers fizzled out, Gamaliel argues in verse 38 that the apostles and their message will eventually evaporate: ***“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.”*** The phrase ***“keep away”*** is the idea of keeping their *“hands off, standing down, and withdrawing.”* Coupled with ***“let them alone,”*** this is an urgent command. Since both of these uprisings failed on their own, he’s suggesting they leave the apostles alone and see if it all implodes.

The word for ***“fail”*** was used of the collapse of a building or of clothing unraveling. Sometimes things that are wrong or even evil seem to be successful for years or decades or even centuries. But everything operates under and within the sweet sovereignty of God. Check out Psalm 33:10: ***“The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.”***

Throughout the centuries people have declared God to be dead and have tried to ban the Bible to no avail. The French author and atheist Voltaire, who lived in the 1700s, reportedly held up a Bible in the air and smugly declared, *“In 100 years this book will be forgotten and eliminated.”* Shortly after his death, his own house became the headquarters for the Geneva Bible Society, which distributed millions of Bibles which he had assigned to extinction.

The main point of Gamaliel’s argument is found in verse 39: ***“But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”*** The phrase ***“opposing God”*** literally means a, *“God-fighter.”*

Here are two passages which emphasize God always wins:

- Proverbs 21:30: ***“No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.”***
- Isaiah 46:10: ***“My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.”***

Not wanting to be known as God-fighters, the end of verse 39 tells us ***“they took his advice.”***

God uses people and problems to accomplish His purposes.

3. Shockingly harmful. The third reaction is shockingly harmful in verse 40: *“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.”* The word for “called” is summoned, which is a legal term.

To “beat” means, “to scourge, flay and strip the skin off.” This is the first incidence in Acts of severe physical persecution. Each apostle was scourged 39 times with a whip with stones in it, causing the skin on their backs to be shredded. The background to this is found in Deuteronomy 25:3: *“Forty stripes may be given him, but not more, lest, if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight.”* The reason they stopped at 39 is because they didn’t want to miscount their mistreatment.

The Mishna describes scourging in detail. The accused would have his hands strapped to two posts and his shirt would be stripped off. The man with the whip stood on an elevated stone and was required to swing with all his might. One-third of the stripes were delivered on the accused’s chest and the other two-thirds landed on his back. One by one the apostles were lined up, having to watch and listen to their partners scream in excruciating pain. Each of them would have been beaten within inches of death.

Jesus predicted this would happen in Matthew 10:17: *“Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues.”* According to 2 Corinthians 11:24, the Apostle Paul experienced this more than once: *“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.”*

Responses

We see two remarkable and unexpected responses from the apostles. Check out the first part of verse 41: *“Then they left the presence of the council...”* The verb “left” has the idea of leaving to go on a mission. I imagine them with smiles on their faces and steadiness in their feet. These were men on mission and no mistreatment was going to deter them.

1. Glow with joy. The first part of their mission was to glow with joy. We see this in verse 41: *“...rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”* This is counter-intuitive, isn’t it? After getting beaten, they burst into joy! The tense of “rejoicing” indicates they were “continually rejoicing.” The apostles were simply being obedient to what Jesus commanded in Luke 6:23:

“Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.”

How did they do this? For them, to suffer like their Savior meant they were somehow worthy to follow His name. Most of us don't think this way, do we?

In his commentary on Acts, Kent Hughes writes:

“I once heard Richard Wurmbbrand describe this kind of joy. When he was in a Romanian prison, his tormentors ripped chunks of flesh out of him, and he had the scars to prove it. He was sentenced to solitary confinement, and for weeks or even months on end no one would speak to him in his tiny cell. Amazingly, during all of that there were times when he was overcome with joy. He would actually stand up in his weakened state and dance around his cell, confident that the angels were dancing with him.

He was released from prison unexpectedly, and as he left the prison dressed like a scarecrow, with his teeth rotted and in terrible shape, he met a peasant woman on the road carrying a basket of beautiful strawberries. When she offered him one, he started to take it but then said, ‘No thanks. I am going to fast.’ He went home to his wife, and they prayed and fasted as a memorial to the joy he had experienced in prison, asking God for the same kind of joy outside prison.”

Friend, do you glow with joy when you go through hard times? The only way to do that is to consider the extent of what Jesus went through for us. When we do, it puts our problems into perspective.

2. Go with the gospel. Not only did they glow with joy even when their circumstances were difficult, in verse 42 they also defied clear orders to not speak in the name of Jesus: ***“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.”*** The phrase ***“every day”*** means daily and it also means, ***“all day long.”*** The word for ***“teaching”*** is explaining and the word for ***“preaching”*** is evangelizing.

D.L. Moody made a covenant with God that he would witness for Christ to at least one person each day. One night, about ten o'clock, he realized that he had not yet witnessed; so he got out of bed, got dressed, and in the Chicago snow, went out in to the street and spoke to a man standing by a lamppost, asking him, “Are you a Christian?” The man flew into a violent

rage and threatened to knock Moody into the gutter. Later, that same man went to an elder in the church and complained that Moody was “doing more harm in Chicago than ten men were doing good.” The elder begged Moody to temper his zeal with knowledge.

Three months later, Moody was awakened at the YMCA by a man knocking at the door. It was the man he had witnessed to. “I want to talk to you about my soul,” he said to Moody. He apologized for the way he had treated Moody and said he had had no peace ever since that night on Lake Street when Moody witnessed to him. Moody led the man to Christ, and he became a zealous worker in the Sunday school.

The apostles taught and preached in large public spaces like the temple and they also spread the good news house by house, family by family, person by person. This became their practice because we see it stated again in Acts 20:20. Let’s make this our commitment in 2020 as well: ***“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house.”***

How are you doing at going with the gospel? Would you consider committing to have at least one gospel conversation every day? I made this covenant several years ago, but I want to recommit because I’ve been slipping. Anyone willing to join me?

Jonathan Edwards, one of America’s greatest theologians from the 1700s, once wrote: *“Resolved: Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can. Resolved: to live with all my might while I do live.”*

While it’s true the gospel has raced around the world, the need is still staggering. If you want to do a deep dive on this, check out the Joshua Project link on our Sermon Extras tab on the app or website. Allow this stat to grip you: *29% of the world’s population has still not heard of Jesus!* These unreached people...

- Have no access to the Bible in their language
- Have no churches in their language
- There are no believers nearby

Check out this slide from the International Missions Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. It shows the progress and the need of reaching unreached people.

- There are 11,750 people groups in the world
- 4,700 have been reached with the gospel, leaving approximately 7,000 still unreached

If we're going to reach the world, some of us are going to have to go cross-culturally with the gospel. In fact, there are only two options – Go, or send others who go. One pastor puts it bluntly: “*Go, send or disobey.*”

Indeed, *God uses people and problems to accomplish His purposes.* Will you let Him use you?

I can think of no better way to end our service than to focus on the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. As we consider what He went through, it will help us to *glow with joy* and to *go with the gospel.*

If you're going through a hard time, think of the hard nails that were pounded into Him. If you're suffering, think of His suffering. If you're being persecuted, ponder how He was mocked, slapped, spit upon, scourged and crucified. He did all that for us, instead of us, in our place so we can experience the grace of salvation and suffering.

Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26: “*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*”

Here are three questions to help us prepare for communion.

1. How am I doing in my relationship with the Lord? Verse 27 – “*Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.*”

2. Is there any sin I’ve committed that I haven’t confessed? Verse 28 – “*But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*”

**3. Is there anyone I need to forgive or ask forgiveness from? Verse 33 –
“Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.”**

Song: “Jesus Only Jesus, Part 1”

Distribute Elements

Song: “Jesus Only Jesus, Part 2”

New Members

Saturday night (Ed to introduce)

- Mike, Jennifer, Karrie and Melanie Moran
- Rick and Michelle Carr

9:00 - Kathy Nagle (Brian to introduce)