**The Unstoppable Gospel**

Acts 28:11-30

Back in **Acts 1** there were only 120 believers - and they were huddled together, ***afraid to leave their upper room***. But they were praying. And they were holding onto the promises Jesus made before ascending to heaven: “You will be my witnesses… to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Then in **Acts 2** ***Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit*** and those timid, fearful disciples were suddenly bold gospel preachers - leading thousands to faith on that day alone. As the church grew in Jerusalem they had to get organized, designating deacons to handle some practical matters.

In **Acts 7-8** persecution broke out and believers who had been reluctant to leave their holy huddle in Jerusalem were forced to scatter. But as they spread out, they brought the gospel with them - and the message was contagious - catching on and taking root all over the Mediterranean region.

Shockingly, **the gospel was received by Gentiles** - and God had to repeatedly instruct the Jewish apostles to accept these formerly unclean barbarian idolaters as brothers and sisters. The gospel was even received by Samaritans - those half-breed compromisers the Jews most despised. But God made it clear that the message of His love and grace was never intended to be just for the Jews - it was always a message of hope and ***salvation for the whole world***.

And so Acts documents the advance of the Gospel:

**The Advance of the Gospel**

Acts 1-7 - thru Jerusalem

Acts 8-12 - all Judea and Samaria

Acts 13-28 - all the way to Rome

For the last year we have studied this inspiring and practical book. I hope you have been encouraged in seeing ***the unstoppable advance of the gospel***. And I hope you have experienced this **in your own life as well**. God’s work is unstoppable because GOD is unstoppable. You and I are quite stoppable - very fallible. But God is not. Nothing can stop His plan, His promises, His power OR His church.

As we conclude the **Unstoppable Series** today, we will be reminded of these encouraging facts. Nothing can stop:

**Nothing can Stop:**

1. **God’s Plan**
2. **God’s Promise**
3. **God’s Word**

We will see how each of these is true ***in the world and in our individual lives***. God has a plan just for you. God has made promises that apply directly and specifically to you. And God’s Word - the Gospel in particular - will change you.

God is faithful to complete the work He begins. Let’s be encouraged today by these ***three unstoppable realities***. First:

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Plan**

“After three months we set sail… Putting in at Syracuse… On the second day we came to Puteoli…” Acts 28:11-13

Why does Luke include so many details about Paul’s travels? First, to demonstrate that he is writing **history, not fiction**. But mainly to ***document God’s faithfulness in the face of great danger and adversity***. It was no small thing that Paul made it to Rome alive. The Jews were determined, for all ten years of his missionary travels, to stop and eventually kill him. The Roman politicians often went along with this, as they tried to win favor with the Jews.

Plus, ***travel in those days was very dangerous***. It was a relatively safe and peaceful time since Rome was in charge and their roads connected things like it never had been in previous generations. But bandits were still around and traveling in a small, unarmed group was risky. Plus, Paul’s three shipwrecks illustrate, just from his experience, that sailing on the Mediterranean was no picnic.

But Paul’s story shows us that ***nothing can stop God’s plan***. God was in control of ***the details of Paul’s life*** - right down to what ship he traveled on, what ports he stopped in and who was there to greet him.

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Plan** - for world history and every **Detail** of your life

“There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome.” Acts 28:14

**Luke is writing personally here** “WE found brothers… WE came to Rome.” History is best documented by eyewitnesses - so passages like this give us great confidence in the reliability of our New Testament. How did Luke gather the stories he put down in his gospel and in Acts? He travelled extensively with Paul. He met personally with Peter and the other apostles. He kept notes, he conducted interviews, he did the research.

Luke documents the details because **the details matter**. Paul was still a prisoner at this point and through the end of Acts. But you’ll notice that all of his care was provided by either Paul himself or the other Christians. Being a prisoner of Rome did not mean they took care of your room and board. ***You had to provide your own food***, clothing and shelter - you just had the company of a Roman soldier all the time. So these brothers who took in the group for seven days - it was that kind of hospitality that provided for the needs of Paul and his team throughout all of his journeys, including this last one to Rome.

**They had no way of planning this**; no way of emailing in advance or making a few calls. Communication in those days moved as slowly as the ships on the Mediterranean Sea. It was passed hand to hand in letters. So each day was a journey of faith for Paul and his team. But God provided again and again.

***I hope you have experienced this in your life as well***. God’s plan is unstoppable. We don’t always understand the reasons and timing of His plan - but God does have a plan and He never misses a step. We had a challenging season of ministry in Kentucky. The church had grown to over 200 and sent around 50 out with a church plant the year before we arrived. Our hope was to help the church grow back past 200 and continue to plant churches in the region.

Unfortunately, a few people got upset about things that changed after the church plant - since the main youth ministry leader went, the Awana commander went, the missions chair went and two of the most popular small group leaders. There were sacrifices the mother church made - and the pain of those losses caused a division in the church. We knew this going in, but didn’t know how serious it would be or how hard it would be to overcome.

I made the mistake of documenting the number of people who left the church the first year we were there. It was a church of around 150 and in that first year we were there ***almost 100 people left***. By the grace of God, other people came in - but it was a very difficult season of ministry - emotionally and practically. Consider, for one example, that our boys were just aging into the teen years. So moving from a large church with a healthy youth program in Charlotte to a small church with no youth program was a sacrifice for our family.

In the middle of those years we struggled to understand why God had called us there. Different pastors and friends told me - “God is preparing you for something.” And you hear that and say, “Yeah, whatever.”

We didn’t understand until we got here. It turned out that Oakwood had been through something very similar. ***Because of our experience in Kentucky we were able to shepherd this church family with more skill and compassion.*** God directs the course of history and in His sovereign wisdom and mercy, He orchestrates even the most minute details of our lives.

***If you’ve been through hard times*** I know it is hard to hear that and even harder to appreciate it in the midst of pain and confusion. But it is true. And the Lord will teach you this even more clearly as you trust in Him and walk with Him. Nothing is wasted. No pain or loss will be for nothing. God will use it to help you grow. He will draw you closer to Himself. He will enable you to encourage others by your example. We are all wounded healers. Your wounds and scars will become part of your ministry.

So don’t be discouraged. Don’t lose heart. Hold onto this truth - nothing can stop God’s plan.

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Plan** - for world history and every **Detail** of your life

“Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.” Rom. 11:25-26, NIV

As soon as Paul reached Rome **he called together the leaders of the JEWS**. Why? Because this was God’s pre-ordained plan: the gospel had to go to the Jew first. That’s how it went in history and it’s how it went in Paul’s ministry. God sent the Law and the prophets to the Jews first - and through them to the world. God sent the apostles to the Jews first, and then to the Gentiles and all over the world.

In his letter to the Romans, most likely sent to them a few years before he got there himself, Paul wrote about God’s plan. ***“Israel has experienced a hardening in part.”*** That’s why he quotes Isaiah here in the conclusion of Acts. 700 years before Jesus was born Isaiah foretold the hardening of Israel - that they would hear but not understand - see but not respond. God showed Paul WHY in Romans 9-11. God started with Israel, but since they rejected the message, it opened the way for the Gentiles (like you and me) to receive the message.

***“Until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.”*** That’s us! That’s you and me and the work we are doing here in Tampa Bay. There is a magic number - a COMPLETION to the great commission. We don’t know what it is - but God does. And nothing can stop that from being accomplished. The full number of the Gentiles WILL come in as the gospel is preached in all nations. And only THEN “the end will come” (Matt 24:14).

But then, after God finishes the work of bringing the gospel to all nations, ***“all Israel will be saved.”*** This verse is why I believe the Gospel is a supernatural boomerang. It was sent out from Jerusalem and continues to move all over the world, but it is making its way BACK to Jerusalem - back to the Jewish people. As the end of history approaches, I believe there will be a great revival among ethnic Jews as the Lord finally opens their eyes to see Jesus as their own Messiah.

Hold onto this truth: nothing can stop God’s plan. He has a determined plan for the whole world AND for you. The story of Israel was written to encourage us and to instruct us in how God works in our lives. God is sovereign over the details and leads us into His will for us. That’s the first unstoppable reality. Here is the second:

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Promise**

“There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them.” Acts 28:14

Paul’s desire and mission was to take the gospel where it had not been heard. But by the time he came to Rome, **the gospel had gotten there first**. Jesus promised in Acts 1:8 that the disciples would be witnesses for him to the end of the earth. Coming from Jerusalem in those days, Rome was nearly the end of the earth - and Spain was totally the end of the earth. The testimony of Acts is that Jesus was faithful to keep His promise - the gospel moved forward, even ahead of Paul and his missionary team!

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Promise** - to build His church, using **us** to reach the world

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:8

***God’s promise is the verbal expression of His plan.*** Just as nothing can stop God’s fore-ordained plan, so nothing can stop His commitment to accomplish that plan as articulated in many promises throughout the centuries. Acts 1:8 is the key promise that is relevant for us at the moment - but it is certainly not the only one (which we’ll see in a minute).

It should be very encouraging to us that **this is phrased as a PROMISE**. Of course, we are COMMANDED in the great commission to make disciples of all nations. But Jesus followed that command with this promise - to reassure His disciples that their mission could not fail. “You WILL BE my witnesses… to the end of the earth.”

In **Matthew 24** Jesus said, “This gospel of the kingdom WILL BE proclaimed in all nations, and then the end will come.” In **Matthew 16:18** Jesus said, “I WILL build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” Nothing can stop the fulfillment of these promises. The gospel WILL advance to the ends of the earth. The means to accomplish that mission is the building of the church.

So ***when you walk across the street*** to talk with a neighbor about their spiritual journey, YOU are helping to fulfill this promise. When you talk with a friend or family member about Jesus and the cross, you are planting gospel seeds that will bear fruit in their lives and in the world. When you invest in a brother or sister in Christ, encouraging him or her to be more effective as a witness for the Lord - you are helping to build up the church and advance the mission.

Nothing can stop the fulfillment of this promise. ***The only question is whether you and I will contribute to it.*** It is possible to miss out. It is possible to just be a bystander, watching others accomplish the mission. It’s like Mordecai said to Queen Esther, “If you do nothing, God will bring salvation some other way. But could it be that you have risen to this position ***for such a time as this***?”

This is a big reason that we use ***the baseball diamond*** [add image to PPT plz] - to communicate that all believers are meant to be PLAYERS, not bystanders. The first exhortation of following Jesus is to GET IN THE GAME. Jesus doesn’t want fans. He doesn’t just want enthusiastic admirers. He wants gospel workers. So fueled by your love for the Lord, and supported in community with other believers, serve the church and reach the world. Get after it! ***Be a player!***

And if you’ve been playing for a while, ***be a COACH***. Bring other Christians along with you. Help others get into the game. Help them improve in their effectiveness. Let’s come back to Paul in verse 20.

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Promise** - to build His church, using **us** to reach the world

“It is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” Acts 28:20

Coming to Rome, the first thing Paul did was to call together **the elders of the Jews** there. He introduced himself and began to explain the message he preached. This group of Jews had no context for Paul himself, but they had heard about Chrsitianity, having been warned about this dangerous new cult.

Notice that Paul called his message, ***“the hope of Israel.”*** He saw the gospel as the fulfillment of the promises to Israel.

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Promise** - to build His church, using **us** to reach the world

“Testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” Acts 28:23

***Jesus was the fulfillment of all of God’s promises in the Old Testament.***

* The promise to **Adam and Eve** to crush the head of the serpent.
* The promise to **Noah** to never again flood the earth in judgment but to bring salvation as He had in the ark.
* The promise to **Abraham** to bless the whole world through His offspring.
* The promise to **Moses** to raise up a prophet like him.
* The promise to **David** to raise up an everlasting dynasty from his line.
* And all of the other promises to **prophets** like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Micah, Joel and on to Malachi.

“The Law and the Prophets” was shorthand for the Jews to summarize the entire Old Testament. From the dawn of creation it was ***God’s plan and His promise to call out a people for His own possession***. Israel was meant to embody this purpose, but mostly illustrated what not to do. Still, through Israel the Messiah was born and from Israel the gospel went out, carried by the Jewish apostles.

**The kingdom of Israel** - God’s preservation of the nation, His restoration of them after exile and His faithfulness to the Jewish people right up to the present day - is symbolic of God’s promise to build an everlasting Kingdom - a new nation composed entirely of priests - a holy people, set apart for the Lord forever.

Even when the Jews rejected Paul, he knew that was a fulfillment of God’s promises.

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Promise** - to build His church, using **us** to reach the world

“The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet…” Acts 28:25

Long before Paul arrived at Rome, in fact hundreds of years before Jesus was born ***Isaiah foretold the stubborn, resistant, hard-hearted response of the Jews***. Was it a shock to God that the Jews rejected and crucified Jesus? Of course not. First because that was how they treated most of the prophets. But also because it was part of God’s plan, foretold in various prophecies.

God deliberately chose to harden the hearts of the Jews in order to make the gospel more readily available to the whole world. Salvation is FROM the Jews but since they largely rejected it, the gospel has not yet been largely received BY the Jews.

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Promise** - to build His church, using **us** to reach the world

“This salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” Acts 28:28

You and I are here in fulfillment of promises like this one. The Gentiles HAVE listened. The gospel HAS moved from Jerusalem throughout the Mediterranean and all over the world.

But there is still a lot of work to do to complete the Great Commission and bring the good news of Jesus Christ to all nations. Yes, God’s plan and promise are unstoppable. But ***notice HOW this promise will be fulfilled***: **through US**.

How did the gospel reach Rome? It wasn’t through Paul - it was through everyday Christians. And this is how the gospel is spreading all over the world right at this moment - through everyday Christians like you and me.

We are the church unstoppable! We have the blueprint of God’s plan. We have the confidence in God’s promises. And our third unstoppable reality: we have the POWER of God’s Word.

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Word**

“He lived there two whole years at his own expense… proclaiming the kingdom of God.” Acts 28:30-31

After a year in the book of Acts we come to the **last two verses**. When Jesus ascended into heaven Paul was an intern in Jerusalem, being trained as a Pharisee. When the early church exploded, he was given the assignment to crush the new cult. But now, around 15 years later, Paul has become the foremost champion of the church - the boldest preacher of the gospel. And there he is - safely in Rome, against all odds, in spite of all kinds of opposition and persecution from the Jews and Romans.

What is Luke showing us by presenting his account this way? He is showing us that God’s work is UNSTOPPABLE. And God’s Work centers on His WORD.

When we started this series I asked the question - who is the main character in the book of Acts? The first half features Peter, the second half features Paul. But neither Peter nor Paul are the main character or the main actor in Acts. It has been said that the Holy Spirit is the main character - and without a doubt He plays a central role throughout the narrative. But the main character as Luke presents the expansion of the early church is **THE WORD**.

On his journeys, Paul circles back to visit places that he has been. But the WORD only advances. In each place, the word of God is only mentioned once. And it always moves forward - from Jerusalem to the corners of Judea, on through Asia minor and Greece and finally to Rome. The implication is that the Word will continue to advance - and nothing can stop it.

There is ***a military feel to this progression*** - like an unstoppable army. 400 years before this moment in history **Alexander the Great** had built the largest empire in history through ten years of apparently unstoppable conquest. Moving east from Greece he conquered Persia and kept going all the way to India with a vision of reaching “the ends of the world and the great outer sea.” He lives in history as the most successful military leader of all time.

Yet he died at age 33 and his empire fell apart soon after. ***The kingdoms of men rise and fall.*** There is only One Kingdom that will endure forever - and that is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God.

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Word** - changing **Hearts** and lives as we share about Jesus

“And teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” Acts 28:31

The message of the kingdom of God **centers on the KING** - the Lord Jesus Christ. For two years up until the time Luke was writing, Paul was safe and sound in Rome - preaching and teaching and writing, sending letters to various churches.

***Luke features Paul because he illustrates the power of the gospel to change lives.*** Paul was a violent enemy of the church - basically a terrorist. But Jesus turned him around completely. And God continues to do this kind of work as the gospel is proclaimed and the kingdom is taught.

May we be like Paul in preaching the gospel with all boldness. He tells us in Romans 1 where this boldness comes from:

1. Nothing can stop God’s **Word** - changing **Hearts** and lives as we share about Jesus

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe.” Romans 1:16

This is where Paul’s confidence rested and it is where our confidence rests:

* Nothing can stop the plans and promises of God.
* Nothing is more powerful than the good news of Jesus Christ proclaimed.
* ***It is the cross of Jesus Christ*** - not our eloquence, not our charisma, not our expert planning - it is the simple, humble, shocking message of the Son of God, crucified and risen again - that is what changes lives. That is what changes the world.

Many of you know that I especially like the video study through **the gospel of Mark** called Christianity Explored. A group just finished this study on Sunday nights through the spring. In Chicago, when I was an outreach pastor, I led groups through this study twice each year. Let me close today and wrap up our series with a couple of stories from those Bible studies to illustrate the power of the gospel and the power of God’s Word.

There was a couple that was struggling to hold their marriage together. She was drinking too much and he was angry. As they read through the first chapters of Mark they saw the authority of Jesus. This woman observed in the class, ***“Wow, it seems like Jesus has authority over EVERYTHING!”*** Later, with just the couple in my office we talked about that authority - the Lordship of Jesus - and applied it to alcohol. If Jesus has authority over everything, can’t you trust Him with your drinking? Can’t you surrender that part of your life to him as well?

She took a big step that day and from what I understand has not had a drop since. Her husband took a few more weeks for his light bulb to go on. He was a tough Catholic who was doing his best to hold the family together. But toward the end of the study he, too, felt the call of Christ, and said, ***“Pastor, I feel like I need to go all in for Jesus.”*** Both of these came face to face with the authority of Jesus - it looked different for each of them, but both came to a place of personal surrender to the Lord.

***That is the power of God’s Word and the power of the good news that Jesus Christ IS LORD.*** He is Lord of all creation, Lord of history, and Lord of you and me. He does have authority over everything. So go all in with Jesus!

One more story.

An older couple had been attending the church for ten years but kind of on the fringes. They joined the Bible study after going through the membership process because they kept struggling to answer our simple questions about the gospel and heaven. At one point this sweet woman said to her husband, ***“Honey, they’re telling us that’s not the right answer.”***

So at first they were irritated that they “failed membership” and had to take a remedial course. But in the middle of that study it struck this woman that she was carrying some deep personal resentment against some burglars who had broken into her house seven years before and taken some special items from her. She knew that she had to forgive them - and in doing so, she suddenly came to understand what the grace of God was all about.

As is often the case, it took her husband a bit longer.

But the cool thing about that story is that, as far as I know, the gospel of Mark Bible study never directly addresses the need to forgive those who wrong you. That’s certainly in the Bible, but it’s not something teacher said and I don’t know why I would have brought that up either. But that’s what the Holy Spirit does as we study God’s Word. He applies the message exactly where each of us needs to hear it.

That is the power of the gospel to change hearts and lives.

So brothers and sisters - be encouraged! ***We are on a mission that cannot fail!*** Jesus is building His church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it! The plans and promises of God are unstoppable! We will be witnesses for Jesus to the end of the earth. ***The Word of God is unstoppable*** - it is a hammer that breaks up rock. It is a fire that burns through excuses and tears down pride.

Let’s pray.