UNSTOPPABLE . . THEN and NOW
A LIFE WELL LIVED
Acts 20:17-38

Can anyone tell me what the theme of our summer series on Acts is? That’s right—UNSTOPPABLE. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the Good News of Jesus is unstoppable; Jesus’ Church is unstoppable; and, you and I, as followers of Jesus Christ, are unstoppable. Even though we are unstoppable, it’s tempting for us to read stories of what Jesus’ followers did in the New Testament and assume that the Holy Spirit’s power was just for then. But the Holy Spirit was for then and it is for now—He is alive and well in us and in our world today, just as He was in the 1st Century.

As John King preached last week he mentioned that it’s sometimes easier to see the reality of the spiritual battle in other cultures. I’ve experienced that on previous missions trips and I also noticed it on our recent trip to Haiti. Along with the reality of spiritual darkness, we also had the privilege of seeing God move in some powerful ways and I asked one of our team members—Sophie Thiessen—to share her experience with us this morning.

Sophie Thiessen’s Video
Jesus Christ was unstoppable then—in the 1st Century accounts we read in the Book of Acts—and He is unstoppable now.

The section of Acts I’m preaching on today is Acts chapters 20-26. Obviously, I’m not going to be able to do justice to 7 chapters and 229 verses in one sermon. What I plan to do is give you an overview of what occurs in this section of Acts and then I want to hone in on chapter 20 verses 17-38—words of farewell that Paul spoke to the Ephesian church leaders prior to sailing for Jerusalem.

John King did a great job last week preaching about Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, which we read about in Acts chapter 19. He talked about the spiritual darkness Paul faced in that prominent ancient city, which was a hub of pagan worship. And I really appreciated the way John brought those truths into our current context and emphasized the freedom each of us can have in Jesus over sin and bondage in our lives. We don’t have to be bound and controlled by sin. In Jesus Christ, we’re free!
After leaving Ephesus, where Paul tells us that he stayed for 3 years, Paul continued going from city to city in countries that we know today as Greece, Serbia and Turkey (point these out on the map). Estimates are that he was in Ephesus from 54-57 A.D. and that he then spent a year going through the cities we read about in Acts 20-26. His time in Ephesus and traveling through Greece, Serbia and Turkey were part of his 3rd missionary journey. Then Paul was imprisoned in Jerusalem for 2 years from 58-60 A.D.

A lot happened during the last year of his 3rd missionary journey and his two years in Jerusalem...

- During this 3rd missionary journey it’s believed that Paul wrote 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans and Galatians.
- Paul raised a young man named Eutychus to life after he fell asleep during one of Paul’s long sermons and fell 3 stories out of a window and died.
- Paul traveled to Jerusalem where he was arrested during a riot in the city. He was then taken before the Jewish legal group the Sanhedrin, where he gave his defense.
- While Paul was in prison, a plot was discovered by his nephew to kill Paul upon his transfer to Caesarea.
- Paul had a chance to present his case and witness to 3 different rulers: Governor Felix, a ruler named Festus and King Agrippa, before finally appealing his case to the Roman emperor, Caesar.

Before we turn our attention to Acts chapter 20 verses 17-38, I want to reflect a bit on the Apostle Paul’s life. With the exception of Jesus, Paul is the most prominent figure in the New Testament and a central figure in the Book of Acts. He wrote nearly half of the books in our New Testament. He planted churches across Asia and Europe and saw hundred and probably thousands of people come to Christ under his ministry. We get a feel for the kind of man Paul was, not only through the amazing things he did, but through some of the statements he made about himself in the letters he wrote. One of his clearest statements is found in 2 Timothy 4:7 & 8 where Paul says,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.
The Apostle Paul understood what it meant to live life committed and surrendered to God. I want us to focus on Paul’s words of farewell to the Ephesian elders at the coastal city of Miletus in Southwestern Turkey—because in these verses Paul recaps his life and ministry and in so doing he provides us with an excellent example of how we can live a life that glorifies and honors God. I’ve titled this message: “A LIFE WELL LIVED.” Every one of us wants to live our lives well. We want to make a difference with our life in the lives of individuals we touch and on our world. And when our time on earth ends we want to hear the words from our Heavenly Father, “Well done, my daughter,” or “Well done, my son.”

I encourage you to find Acts 20:17-38 in your Bible or electronic device and to follow along as I read Paul’s words...

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

The first thing I want to call our attention to from Paul’s life is the consistency and integrity with which he lived his life. In verses 18 & 19 and 33-35 Paul says, “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the
Jews.” And, “I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

Integrity and consistency are at the heart of us living in such a way that God gains glory and honor through our lives. Integrity is especially important in our day when there is often a noticeable gap between how people live in their public and private lives and when people are so skeptical because of the inconsistencies they’ve seen in people’s lives. Becoming a father heightened my awareness of the need for integrity and consistency in my life—knowing that my children were always watching me and imitating things they’d see in my life. I keep a poem titled, “The Little Chap Who Follows Me,” saved on my computer. It speaks specifically to the relationship between a father and son and the language is a bit dated, but its emphasis on integrity can speak to all of us.

THE LITTLE CHAP WHO Follows ME

A careful man I want to be, a little fellow follows me;
I do not dare to go astray for fear he’ll go the self-same way.
I cannot once escape his eyes. Whate’er he sees me do he tries.
Like ME he says he’s going to be—that little chap who follows me.
I must remember as I go through summer suns and winter snows,
I am building for the years to be—that little chap who follows me.

The Apostle Paul understood how critical integrity and consistency were to his purpose of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, because people were closely watching and examining his life. Paul had many critics of his life, ministry and message, but his integrity and consistency pointed people toward Jesus. And integrity and consistency are just as important for our lives, because many people are observing how we live.

Another trait Paul identifies in this passage is, boldly witnessing to Jesus’ saving power in his life. Listen to Paul’s words to the Ephesian church leaders in verses 20 & 21 and 26 & 27: “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” And, “Therefore, I declare to
you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you
the whole will of God."

Paul was an evangelist—a calling he received from God in a dramatic way. Few of us
have the same calling as Paul and yet each of us is also charged with the responsibility of
witnessing to Jesus’ saving power—speaking about what He has done for us and making others
aware that his salvation is also available to them. For some of us this seems very daunting,
because we don’t view ourselves as outspoken or capable of sharing our faith with others. I
know I’ve often viewed myself that way. But at some point God gave me some insight that I
hope you’ll find helpful. I’ve come to understand that my goal is to position myself in such a
way that I have opportunities to be in relationship with people who don’t know Christ. I pray
for them and look for opportunities to share Jesus with them, but mostly, I’m just living my life
in front of them. I know that the road each of us travels on through life is filled with bumps and
potholes—some of which are unavoidable. I want to be close enough to people who don’t
know Jesus that when they hit the bumps and potholes, I have an opportunity to speak with
them about the faith that I have in Jesus and what is available to them in Christ.

Last week I was meeting with a man I’ve become acquainted with through a local
community organization. I know that he’s recently walked through a family crisis. I asked how
he was doing and as he talked about how hard the past month or so have been I sensed God
nudging me to pray for him. I hesitated for a bit, but the sense I had was pretty strong. So,
after a while I asked if I could pray for him. He agreed and I prayed asking for God’s peace for
him and his family. I don’t know how God used that prayer in his life, but it was a door I felt the
Holy Spirit was asking me to walk through. As we tune into God’s heart of love for people, the
Holy Spirit will open doors of opportunity for us to share his love and truth with them. Paul was
able to say that he was innocent before God because he shared his faith in Jesus whenever the
opportunity arose.

A third thing I see in Paul’s life which he emphasized here and which may stand out
most in Paul’s life is that he was focused, deeply committed to God and had a clear sense of
purpose. This comes through clearly in verse 24. I’ll read verses 22 & 23 to set up verse 24:
“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to
me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.” And now verse 24: “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” Paul had a crystal clear understanding of his purpose in life. Again, I’m fully aware that you and I aren’t the Apostle Paul, but we are called to be locked into what our ultimate purpose in life is—bringing glory and honor to our Heavenly Father. In the midst of focusing on family and friends and schooling and your occupation and routine tasks that need to get done, how do you stay focused on your purpose in life? Prayer, reading God’s Word, worship music and relationships with like-minded believers are all helpful tools in reminding us who we are and what we’re about. A Scripture passage that I find beneficial in helping me focus on my purpose in life is found in Romans chapter 12 verses 1 & 2. I frequently recite this verse at the beginning of my day.

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Paul is a great example of someone who was able to stay focused on what his life was all about.

The final trait I want us to focus on today in Paul’s life is found in verse 32: “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” At the end of the day, after all of his hard work and time invested and prayers, Paul understood that people’s welfare rested in God’s hands and he was able to commit people and his work to God. This is so important for us to remember. One morning this week as I was walking and praying, I was thinking about people I have a burden for who have experienced God’s work in their lives, but are currently struggling. I started to name them in prayer and honestly, it was discouraging. Thinking about these people seemed to point to a lot of wasted time and energy. But as I prayed I was reminded that they are in God’s hands. My job is to be faithful in investing in people, but their lives are in his hands, not mine. If we don’t remember that God is the one we entrust people to, we’ll quickly grow discouraged and feel like quitting. Paul saw tremendous victories in his ministry and he
saw what could have been overwhelming defeats, but through it all he didn’t lose sight of the truth that his job was to commit people to God.

Paul’s words—which he spoke to the Ephesian elders at Miletus before he sailed to Jerusalem that are recorded in Acts chapter 20 verses 17-38—are a great reminder for us of what a life well-lived looks like. These words take on greater importance when we take into account that Paul had lived with these leaders for 3 years in Ephesus. These people knew him well. Paul lived with integrity and consistency; He Boldly witnessed to Jesus’ saving power; He was focused, deeply committed to God and had a clear sense of purpose; and, He was able to commit people to God understanding that their welfare was in God’s hands. My hope is that like the Apostle Paul, you and I at the end of our lives can say:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. 2 Timothy 4:7 & 8