

Unstoppable

The book of Acts reads like the script for an adventure movie, especially the last few chapters. The main character is Paul, who started out as a persecutor of the Christians and then became one himself after a dramatic supernatural encounter with God on the road to Damascus. At first, the church is not exactly sure what to do with this assassin-turned-preacher, but they finally have to acknowledge his conversion ... and (more reluctantly) they have to accept his call to preach to the Gentiles.

For the last several years, Paul has been an itinerant missionary, traveling to the far-flung reaches of the Roman Empire to preach the Gospel and establish churches in as many cities as possible. It has been a breath-taking ride, filled with dozens of miracles and thousands of conversions ... and with months of jail time, beatings, and cunning plots against his life. It is only the mercy of God that he has survived at all.

After three tours of duty on the mission field, Paul finally decides to return to Jerusalem. That is not as simple as it sounds – Jerusalem is probably the single most dangerous place on the planet for Paul. The Jews consider him the “Judas of Judaism” because they think he has dishonored their religion by converting to Christianity. More than one minister has prophesied that jail time awaits him if he returns. But he goes in spite of all that because he knows it is the will of God.

Sure enough, Paul gets arrested and thrown in jail once again. What was he doing this time? Stirring up a riot? No! All he was doing was praying in the Temple. But his mere presence was enough to upset the powers of Hell. So Paul finds himself sitting in the “jail of injustice” through no fault of his own ... and the problem with THAT prison is that sometimes you get delivered and sometimes you don't.

God had sent an angel more than once to get Peter out of jail. In Philippi, Paul had been supernaturally delivered from jail by an earthquake. But this time there would be no angel and no earthquake ... because God had a purpose in Paul's unjust imprisonment. So did God forsake His servant? Oh no, Jesus did appear to Paul in jail. But the conversation didn't go quite like you (or Paul) might have expected ...

Jesus: Cheer up, Paul!

Paul: Jesus! Am I glad to see you! Are you going to get me out of jail?

Jesus: Uh, no. The good news is you'll be taking an all-expense-paid trip to Rome. The bad news is the arrangements are going to take awhile.

This imprisonment isn't for a few weeks, or even for a few months ... it's for TWO LONG YEARS. Finally, Paul gets to make a statement in his defense before the Roman Governor Felix.

It's an amazing thing to watch the Apostle Paul give his defense when he's on trial. It seems like he always forgets why he's there. After a few moments he forgets to defend himself and starts testifying about Jesus Christ. And after a little while longer you forget exactly who is on trial. It always ends up seeming like the judge is on trial, in this case Felix.

During the first part of the proceedings, when the hired orator Tertullus presents the Sanhedrin's case, he accuses Paul of belonging to a "sect" or cult. During his defense Paul also makes reference to "the Way which they call heresy." You see, from the very beginning, those who are really on fire for Jesus have been accused of belonging to a cult. It was that way in the book of Acts and it's that way today. If you get that slanderous label thrown on you, don't be ashamed of it, wear it as a badge of honor. They did the same to Paul. It's part of being a true follower of “The Way.”

Felix was under conviction the entire time Paul spoke; the Bible even says that he “trembled.” He could have gotten saved, but he didn't. He made some lame excuse about it not being a “convenient season.” And now, Felix has no more time at all ... only all of eternity to contemplate what a fool he was for not seizing the opportunity he had to be saved!

Felix is recalled to Rome, and Paul has to go through the entire process again before his successor Festus ... and this means even more time in prison. Because Paul knows that a full trial before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem spells certain death, he finally appeals his case to Caesar. Before they ship him off, Paul has to suffer the indignity of one last trial before King Agrippa, who is the token Jewish King under Roman rule.

Now put yourself in Paul's sandals. ☺ You've been arrested for doing nothing more than praying as a Jew in the Jewish Temple, you've been charged with a capital offense of which you are completely innocent, and now you have been unjustly imprisoned for more than two years! At last you have a chance to tell your side of the story before someone who might just be the least bit sympathetic. Exactly what would you say?

Acts 26:2 I think myself happy, king Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself this day before thee touching all the things whereof I am accused of the Jews:

Wouldn't you be prone to say something like ... “I think myself SAD” ... “I think myself MAD” ... “I have been grossly mistreated” ... “I am the victim of a wicked plot by a bunch of liars who have slandered my reputation” ...

But not Paul! His confession wasn't that he was sad, mad, mistreated or a victim of any kind. His confession was “I THINK MYSELF HAPPY!” He absolutely refused to let his circumstances dictate his attitude.

Philippians 4:11 Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.

Once again, Paul turns the tables and before long it is Agrippa who is on trial. He is under conviction, and he utters some fateful words ...

Acts 26:28 Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

ALMOST. Agrippa went to hell for one word. ALMOST. If you remove that one word from Agrippa's confession it changes everything, but there's no such thing as an "Almost Christian." Can you imagine Agrippa in hell uttering one word over and over throughout eternity? ALMOST ...

Finally, Paul gets his "all-expense-paid" trip to Rome – as a political prisoner. And before he arrives in Rome it will be drama on the high seas – a shipwreck, marooned on an island, and bitten by a poisonous snake. But Paul always rises to the top. He gets on board a prisoner, but by the end of the journey he's calling the shots. Not to mention it was his faith alone that saved 276 lives. Talk about an adventure living for God!

Once in Rome, Paul is placed under house arrest, chained to Roman soldiers, once again waiting for more than two years for his case to be tried by Caesar ... and it's at his own expense! It's the "waiting game" all over again. That's why Acts doesn't really have a definite ending ...

Acts 28:30-31 (KJV) And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.

AKOLUTOS: In the Greek language, Acts ends with this single word. Biblical scholar I. Howard Marshall writes that "all the emphasis lies on that last phrase." The word means "unhindered," "unpreventable" and even "unstoppable." It suggests a wide-open field of opportunity.

Let's get this straight – Paul is chained to a Roman soldier, forcibly confined to his lodgings, and has been awaiting trial for OVER FOUR YEARS – and Luke writes that he is "unstoppable"? **Is this God's idea of irony?** Paul immobilized by Roman chains doesn't exactly seem like a promising strategy for accomplishing the mission of the church!

Unstoppable?! He can't even leave his house! And meanwhile, Christians are being martyred wholesale in the city by the Emperor Nero who is on one of his rampages. Paul will soon be included in the killings, beheaded for the name of Jesus. **Unstoppable?!**

Many of the newer Bible translations pick up on this term by saying something like "no one tried to stop him." But that is not exactly the point – no one COULD stop Paul, because God was with him even though he was in chains! The English Standard Version is probably the most clear:

Acts 28:30-31 (ESV) He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

The writer Luke understands something that you need to understand. All of the judicial foot-dragging that has Paul mired in prison, the religious blindness that has caused the Jews to reject their own Messiah, even the massacres that are filling Rome's coliseums with Christian corpses ... none of these qualify as hindrances against the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because the church in Acts was **UNSTOPPABLE**. You could fight those Christians, persecute them, throw them to the lions, burn them at the stake, fill the catacombs with their bones – but you could not stop them! They were determined to turn the world upside down, and they did. They absolutely changed the world – and we are called to follow in their steps. We believe the same gospel, we preach the same message, we have the same commission and the same Holy Spirit as Peter, Paul, James, John, Barabbas, Silas, Timothy and the rest. We can do what they did! And so, "**UNSTOPPABLE**" stands as the last word on the subject!

Paul understood something that you need to understand. We are willing participants not only in WHAT God does, but in the WAY He does it. His ways are higher than our ways! **UNSTOPPABLE** tells us that all the obstacles that now loom large are simply of no account in the agenda of God's Kingdom. **UNSTOPPABLE** is a timely word for the Church today, which is constantly tempted to use the world's means to do God's work.

Ephesians 6:20 For which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Philippians 1:12-14 But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel; So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places; And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

2 Timothy 2:9 Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound.

You and I are writing "ACTS 29" with our lives. Let's make it good!