



# Unstoppable

## Kicking It Off

What is something you kept doing even after someone told you to stop, because you believed it was the right thing to do?

## Read

Acts 5:17-42

## Summary

When you're in the ocean, the waves just move you. You don't even realize it, but you look up and you're way down the beach from where you started. That's kind of how it is walking with God. His Spirit is constantly moving you, and you can't fight it any more than you can fight the ocean.

In the early church, the religious leaders threw the apostles in prison because they wouldn't stop talking about Jesus. And here's the thing, God literally opened the prison doors overnight. An angel showed up, let them out, and basically said, "Go right back to where you were and keep doing what you were doing." So they did. They went straight back to the temple and started teaching again. The leaders were baffled because the prison was still locked, the guards were still there, but the apostles were gone.

When the authorities confronted them again, Peter said something that really gets to the heart of it: "We obey God, not people." He wasn't being rebellious for the sake of it. He was saying that following Jesus comes first, above everything else, above comfort, above legality, above what's safe. The apostles didn't have anything like our freedoms. They could be killed for what they believed. But they kept going because they trusted in a power bigger than any government.

After they got beaten for preaching, they actually walked away happy. Not because they liked getting hurt, but because they saw it as an honor to go through what Jesus went through. Their focus wasn't on winning some political battle. It was on sharing Jesus, no matter the cost.

When you're walking with God and following his lead, nothing can ultimately stop what he's doing through you. The question is whether you'll get in the water or stay on the shore.

## Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. The apostles were told to go back to the exact place where they had been arrested and do the same thing that got them arrested. Is there an area of obedience in your life where God keeps calling you back even though it feels risky or uncomfortable?
3. Peter declared that obeying God comes before obeying human authorities. What is something in your daily life that competes with your allegiance to following Jesus?
4. The early church had no legal protections for their faith, yet they were bolder than many Christians who enjoy full religious freedom today. In what ways has comfort or security made you less dependent on the Holy Spirit?
5. After being beaten, the apostles rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. How do you typically respond when following your faith leads to personal cost or pushback from others?

## Significant Quotes from Sermon

"When your religion is based on your own power, you cannot open the jail cell doors. If you are living a Christian life without understanding the power of the Holy Spirit, the unstoppable power of the Holy Spirit, you are shortchanging your faith. You are experiencing a life where you can be thwarted, where your purpose in life can be stopped by the authorities, by the government."

"Our call is not to reform the Sanhedrin. Our call is not to reform the Roman Empire. Our call is to proclaim a Savior who is able to defeat death. And so even if you kill me, you only kill me because God allowed me to be killed. And even if you kill me in the same way that they killed Jesus, God is able to raise me from the dead."

"The beauty of being a Christian is that when we are on the bottom, we can rejoice because of the unstoppable power of God. Suffering for the name of Christ is an honor, not a defeat. This is one of the most counterintuitive things about the gospel, because the world will say suffering is shame, suffering is defeat, suffering means that your side has lost. But we can't lose."

"The comfort of the First Amendment has caused some people to be apathetic. You were never intended to be comfortable. The apostles lived in a country where you could be stoned to death for saying something about who God was. And yet they were bolder than most of us have ever been. My allegiance to the Lord outranks my allegiance or my enjoyment of the Constitution."

**Sermon Notes**

*Acts 5:17-42*

*17 But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy 18 they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." 21 And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.*

*Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. 22 But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, 23 "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside." 24 Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. 25 And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people." 26 Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.*

*27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."*

*33 When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. 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. 35 And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 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. 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. 38 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; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, 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. 41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.*

## Outline

1. God Opens Doors No One Can Shut (vv. 17–26)
  - a. The high priest and Sadducees arrested the apostles and put them in public prison
  - b. An angel opened the prison doors at night with three imperatives: go, stand, speak (v. 20)
  - c. The command was to return to the same place and do the same thing that caused their arrest
  - d. Officers found the prison locked and guards in place, but the cells were empty (vv. 22–23)
  - e. The apostles were already in the temple teaching; they were brought back without force because the people supported them (vv. 25–26)
  - f. The mission of the church from its inception: proclaim who Jesus is
  - g. The power of the Holy Spirit is intended to spread the gospel, not to serve our personal desires
  - h. God does not always open the doors; Paul wrote epistles from prison because God's work continued inside the cell
  - i. Wherever the Holy Spirit takes you, you are positioned to do his work
2. Obedience to God Outranks Every Other Allegiance (vv. 27–32)
  - a. The high priest rebuked them: "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name" (v. 28)
  - b. Peter's response: "We must obey God rather than men" (v. 29)
  - c. This is not dismissing earthly law; it is ordering allegiance properly
  - d. The apostles taught Scripture the way Jesus had taught them to interpret it, empowered by the Holy Spirit
  - e. The Holy Spirit is given to those who obey (v. 32)
  - f. The First Amendment is a blessing, but comfort has bred apathy; the apostles had no such protections
  - g. Even if it were illegal to preach, the mission would not change
  - h. The church's focus should not be on reforming governments but on the unstoppable power of the Holy Spirit
3. Suffering for the Name Is an Honor, Not a Defeat (vv. 33–42)
  - a. The council was enraged and wanted to kill them (v. 33)
  - b. Gamaliel's wisdom: man-made movements die off; if this is from God, you cannot overthrow it and may be found opposing God (vv. 34–39)
  - c. After being beaten and charged not to speak, the apostles left rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name (vv. 40–41)
  - d. They did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus, in the temple and from house to house (v. 42)

- e. Rejoicing in suffering is not masochism; their eyes were fixed on Jesus who suffered before them
- f. The Sadducees believed death was final; the apostles believed in resurrection and the unstoppable power of God over death
- g. The gospel turns the world's power structure upside down: persecution fuels the mission rather than stopping it

## Notes

There is something about standing in the ocean that teaches you about power. When you are out in the waves, you quickly learn that you cannot fight the water. You can resist it, you can try to plant your feet, but the current will move you. And often, without even realizing it, you drift far from where you started. You look up and suddenly you are half a mile down the shore, wondering how you got there. That is what it is like to walk with the Holy Spirit. He will take you somewhere. He will not leave you where you began.

The longer you walk with the Lord, the more you realize that even when it does not feel like you are going anywhere, God has been moving you. Not just physically, though that is true as well, but through experiences, through seasons, through a depth of life you did not anticipate. And here is the reality that should reframe everything about how we live as the church: the Holy Spirit is an unstoppable force. God's power cannot be contained, controlled, or overcome. We talk about waterfalls and the force of nature, but even these pale in comparison to the power of God. We can harness a waterfall. We cannot harness the Almighty.

And yet, so many of us do not treat God that way. We do not live as though his power is unstoppable. The reason, I believe, is that we are not getting into the water. We are standing on the shore, watching from a distance, never submitting ourselves to the current of his will. God's sovereign will is going to be accomplished regardless of what we do. But we have a choice: we can get in, or we can stay out. We can walk in obedience to the Holy Spirit, or we can sit on the sidelines.

The early church understood this. In Acts chapter 5, the apostles have been arrested and thrown into prison by the high priest and the Sadducees. This ruling authority believed they could quell the movement. They thought prison would be enough to stop the spread of the gospel. But during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and gave them a command with three imperatives: go, stand, and speak. Go back into the city. Stand among the people. Speak the words of life. The angel did not tell them to start a revolution or dismantle the government. He told

them to go back to the same place where they had been arrested and do the same thing that got them arrested in the first place.

This is what it means when we say that the unstoppable power of God opens doors no one can shut. The authorities locked the prison. The guards stood at their posts. And yet, when the officers came to retrieve the apostles, the cells were empty, the doors still locked, the guards still standing. Meanwhile, the apostles were in the temple courts, teaching. The power of God is not limited by human institutions. It is not contained by governments or authorities. If God wants the doors open, they will open. And if he does not open them, it is because his work can be accomplished even within those walls. Paul wrote some of his greatest letters from prison. The mission does not stop because the circumstances are uncomfortable.

When the apostles were dragged before the council again, the high priest was indignant. "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name," he said. The audacity of this moment is remarkable. The apostles had just been supernaturally freed from a locked prison, and the high priest's response was not wonder or curiosity but frustration. Peter's reply is one of the most important declarations in the New Testament: "We must obey God rather than men." This is not petulance. Peter is not dismissing the laws of the land as irrelevant. He is making a statement about the ordering of allegiance. The law of grace under which the apostles lived, the mission to spread the name of Jesus, took priority over every other authority.

Obedience to God outranks every other allegiance. This is a statement that carries enormous weight, especially in a context like ours where we enjoy freedoms like the First Amendment. Religious liberty is a beautiful thing. The freedom to assemble, to worship, to speak openly about faith, these are gifts. But they were never meant to be the foundation of our boldness. The apostles did not have a First Amendment. They lived under a system where you could be killed for your religious convictions. And yet they were bolder than most of us have ever been. The comfort of our freedoms has, in some ways, made us apathetic. We were never intended to be comfortable.

What does this kind of obedience look like practically? It means that even if the law changed tomorrow, even if it became illegal to gather or to preach the gospel, the mission would not change. The church's singular purpose from its inception has been to spread the name of Jesus. Not to reform governments, not to win culture wars, not to accumulate political influence, but to proclaim that Jesus is the risen Lord. And the power of the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey, to those who step into the arena and put themselves in front of whatever opposition may come.

After the council heard Peter's words, they were enraged and wanted to kill the apostles. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel stood up and offered a piece of wisdom that

echoes through the centuries. He reminded the council that man-made movements always die off. He gave examples of leaders who had gathered followers, only for those movements to dissolve after the leaders perished. His counsel was simple: if this movement is of human origin, it will fail on its own. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop it. You may even find yourselves fighting against God. There is something sobering about this wisdom, that the chaos and movements of man are cyclical and temporary, but the work of God is permanent and unstoppable.

The council took Gamaliel's advice, but not before having the apostles beaten. And here is where the story reaches its most counterintuitive and powerful moment. After being beaten, the apostles left the council rejoicing. Not because they enjoyed pain. Not because they were masochists seeking suffering. They rejoiced because they had been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. Their eyes were fixed on their Savior who, only months earlier, had endured a far more brutal beating and an agonizing death on a cross. To suffer as Christ suffered was not defeat. It was honor.

This turns the world's understanding of power completely on its head. The world says suffering is shame, that if you are being beaten and silenced, you have lost. The natural response is to fight back, to seize power, to reform the system so it can never happen again. But the apostles did not operate by that logic. They understood that the gospel's most counterintuitive truth is that persecution fuels the mission rather than stopping it. The Sadducees believed that death was the end, that if they killed you, it was over. The apostles believed the opposite. If you kill me, it is just the beginning, because my Lord has the power to raise the dead.

This is the gospel. It is looking at the full weight of earthly power, Rome, the religious authorities, the threat of death, and declaring that none of it is sufficient to stop what God is doing. The Romans could not stop Jesus. The chief priests could not stop him. And the same unstoppable power that raised Christ from the dead is the power available to every believer through the Holy Spirit.

The call for the church today is not to play the games of the finite, not to be consumed with reforming systems or accumulating influence, but to submit to the infinite, unstoppable power of God. Whether in suffering or in blessing, in prison or in freedom, the mission remains the same: go, stand, speak. Share the name of Jesus. And trust that the God who opens prison doors and conquers death will accomplish his will through those who choose to obey.

## Blog

The Jerusalem authorities had a problem. The apostles were filling the city with their teaching about a risen Jesus, and every tool of suppression the establishment deployed kept failing. Acts 5:17-42 is the account of that failure, and it tells us something essential about the nature of the gospel and the power of God behind it.

By the time we reach Acts 5, Luke has already established a pattern. The apostles proclaim the resurrection. The authorities push back. God intervenes. The mission continues. This passage represents the second arrest of the apostles, and it's a significant escalation from the first. The first time, only Peter and John were detained and released with a warning. This time, all the apostles are thrown into public prison. The full Sanhedrin convenes. There's a formal trial, a beating, and an explicit command to stop preaching. The establishment is done issuing warnings. They want this movement shut down.

Luke tells us the high priest and his associates "were filled with jealousy" (v. 17). The verb Luke uses for "filled" here is the same one he uses elsewhere for being filled with the Holy Spirit. That parallel is not accidental. Two competing forces are driving the narrative: the Spirit fills the apostles with boldness, and jealousy fills the authorities with rage. The Sadducees, who controlled the temple apparatus and rejected the resurrection, had the most to lose from a movement proclaiming that a crucified man had risen from the dead. Their opposition wasn't principled theological disagreement. It was territorial. It was about power.

So they arrested the apostles and locked them in a public jail. The public setting was deliberate, an act of humiliation meant to discredit the movement. But that night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought the apostles out, and gave them a command: "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life" (v. 20). Three imperatives in that sentence. Go. Stand. Speak. The angel didn't tell them to lie low, regroup, or develop a subtler strategy. He told them to go back to the exact place that got them arrested and do the exact thing that got them arrested. And at daybreak, that's exactly what they did.

The scene that follows is rich with irony. The full Sanhedrin assembles with great ceremony (Luke specifies "the full assembly of the elders of Israel"), sends officers to the jail to retrieve the prisoners, and discovers the cell is empty. The doors are locked. The guards are standing at their posts. Everything looks right. But there's no one inside. Luke draws this out with almost cinematic detail, and the resonance with the empty tomb is hard to miss. As with the resurrection, human barriers proved no match for what God intended to accomplish. The authorities who were supposed to have all the answers were, as Luke puts it, "much perplexed" (v. 24), wondering what this would come to.

When the apostles are finally brought before the council (without force, because the officers feared the people, another quiet inversion of power), the high priest's frustration is palpable. "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name," he says, "yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching" (v. 28). He doesn't realize what he's confessing. The city is full of the gospel. What the council calls a problem, the reader recognizes as the mission succeeding. And notice that the high priest won't even say Jesus' name. "This name. This man's blood." The avoidance is telling.

Peter's response is the theological center of the passage: "We must obey God rather than men" (v. 29). The word "must" carries the force of necessity in the original language. This isn't Peter expressing a preference. It's a statement about the way reality works. When God commissions something, no human authority can override it. Peter doesn't stop at defiance, though. He immediately preaches the gospel in compressed form: God raised Jesus from the dead. God exalted Him to His right hand as Prince and Savior. God offers repentance and forgiveness of sins through Him. Peter's courage isn't rooted in personal toughness. It's rooted in the reality of the resurrection. He can't stop speaking because what he's witnessed is true. "We are witnesses to these things," he says, "and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him" (v. 32). Two testimonies, apostolic and the Spirit's, standing together.

The council's response is fury. Luke's word for their rage literally means "sawn through." They wanted to kill the apostles on the spot. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a respected teacher of the law (and later Paul's mentor), intervened with a pragmatic argument. He cited two failed revolutionary movements led by Theudas and Judas the Galilean. Both leaders died, both movements scattered. His counsel was simple: if this movement is of human origin, it will collapse on its own. If it is from God, you won't be able to stop it, and you'll find yourselves fighting against God (v. 39). That phrase, "fighting against God," comes from a tradition where opposing God is the ultimate act of futile arrogance.

Gamaliel's logic is sound as far as it goes, but Luke doesn't present him as a model of faith. He's a providential instrument, a moderating voice that buys the church time. His argument falls short of what Peter has already proclaimed: this movement isn't awaiting verification. It is from God. The resurrection settled that question.

Still, even Gamaliel's restraining influence only went so far. The council ordered the apostles flogged before releasing them. This was likely the "forty lashes minus one," a severe and humiliating punishment designed to break the will. It was physical brutality, not a formality.

And here we reach the most remarkable verse in the passage. "They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for

the name" (v. 41). The phrase underneath the English is vivid: "considered worthy to be dishonored." The paradox is the whole point. What the council intended as humiliation, the apostles received as an honor. The punishment meant to silence them became, in their understanding, confirmation that they were walking in the footsteps of Jesus. Notice too that Luke simply says "the Name," without specifying Jesus. The Name the council refused to say had become so central to the apostles' identity that it needed no elaboration. Everyone knew whose Name they meant.

Then comes verse 42, the capstone of the entire account: "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus." The language is blunt. They did not stop. After arrest, imprisonment, a formal trial before the highest court in the land, and a brutal flogging, there was no pause. No strategic retreat. No period of recovery and reassessment. The very next thing the apostles did was the very thing they had been beaten for doing. And they did it every day, in public and in private, with the same message: Jesus is the Christ.

This is what makes the gospel unstoppable. It isn't the strength or resilience of its messengers, though the apostles' courage is genuinely remarkable. It's the authority behind the message. God opened the prison doors. God confused the council. God provided a restraining voice at the moment of greatest danger. And God so transformed the hearts of ordinary men that they counted a flogging as a privilege. The mission advanced not because of favorable circumstances but through hostile ones.

The pattern Luke establishes here runs through the rest of Acts. Persecution scatters the church, and the scattering spreads the gospel (Acts 8). Imprisonment gives Paul a platform to witness to guards and governors. Every attempt to contain the message ends up amplifying it. The authorities threw everything they had at the early church, and when the dust settled, the apostles were still preaching.

We tend to measure faithfulness by outcomes we can see, by comfort, by open doors, by the absence of resistance. The apostles operated with a different framework entirely. They measured faithfulness by obedience. Opposition didn't signal they were on the wrong path. It confirmed they were on the right one. The unstoppable life, as Acts 5 presents it, is not the life free from suffering. It's the life that keeps going when suffering comes, carried forward by a joy the world can't explain and an obedience no authority can silence. God's purposes will advance. The only question is whether we'll be the kind of people who advance with them.