

Mission Unstoppable

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Date: 28 April 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I wonder if you could answer this question. What's the state of Christianity in Britain today? What would you say? How would you describe a friend who asks you, what's the state of Christianity in Britain today?

It might seem like it's mission impossible. It might seem as if the church in Western Europe, secular United Kingdom, is really never going to grow much bigger than it is because it seems like the secular tide is just too strong as it flows against the church.

A number of years ago, I read a book by Callum Brown, who's a social historian and a professor at the University of Glasgow. And his book's called *The Death of Christian Britain*.

And so you can tell where he's coming from in his title. And he argues in this book that Britain did enjoy a period of prosperity when it came to Christianity, but then it began to fall into terminal decline.

And he traces it back to somewhere around the 1960s. And when he wrote this, he didn't think the situation could be reversed. And so he said, Christianity is becoming Britain's past, not its present.

[1 : 1 2] And of course, the statistics do tell us that the decline of churchgoing tends to continue with increasing pace. And so is it a case of mission impossible for Christianity?

Not everybody thinks so. Justin Brierley, who's the host of a radio show and a podcast called *Unbelievable*, he suggests that there's a turning of the secular tide in the West.

And he documents this in his book, which is called *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*. Why new atheism grew old and secular thinkers are considering Christianity again.

And so Justin Brierley, he comments on this in an article in *The Spectator*, which is called *A Christian Revival is Underway in Britain*. And this is what he says.

He says, The new atheists of the early 2000s, led by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, predicted a utopia founded upon science and reason once we had abandoned religion.

[2 : 2 3] But their best-selling books proved to be full of empty promises. All that our post-Christian society has delivered so far is confusion, a mental health crisis in the young, and the culture wars.

And so Justin Brierley then goes on to describe how intellectuals these days tend to, the majority of prominent ones, Justin Peterson, Douglas Murray, and so on, they see the value in Christianity because all of the other theories, philosophies, secular thinking has actually failed us.

All the alternatives to Christianity just haven't worked. And so there's a resurgence in thinking through, well, could Christianity be true? And so the question is, is Christianity mission impossible? Or is it, in fact, mission unstoppable? Well, when we read a passage like we did earlier in Acts chapter 13, we get the answer. Because our text is really the outworking of some words that Jesus said earlier in Acts.

In Acts chapter 1, verse 8, before he ascended into heaven, Jesus said, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[3 : 4 5] So, Jesus' answer to the question, is Christianity mission impossible, is no. It is not mission impossible.

Jesus is saying here in Acts that Christianity is mission unstoppable because his church is three things. And these are our three points this afternoon.

His church is on a mission with a message and growing a movement. So let's look at these. First of all, on a mission. The church is on a mission. Now, the church in Antioch, which is there in chapter 13 and the end of chapter 12, the church in Antioch is the first missionary sending church.

Not because they had a strategic plan for what they were going to do, but because the Holy Spirit pushed the believers outwards. So Paul and Barnabas are those who are sent out as the first overseas missionaries.

And so the journey begins in Cyprus, which happens to be Barnabas' homeland. And so what does their mission involve? Well, verse 5 says, when they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues and John was with them as their helper.

[5 : 00] So the plan for their mission was to proclaim the word of God, but they do it in Jewish synagogues first. And so what Luke does is he records an encounter encounter in a place called Paphos as the mission of Jesus is advancing.

And it's an interesting encounter because the pace of his narrative slows down and he focuses in on just one man and his servant. And so there's opposition to the Christian message here in verse 6 to 8.

And it comes from this guy called Bar-Jesus, which basically his name is Son of Jesus, but he's also called Elemus the sorcerer. And Elemus the sorcerer wanted to stop his boss, Sergius Paulus, a powerful man, from hearing the word of God.

And I guess as a sorcerer he figured out there was really no future job prospects for him if his employer became a Christian. And so he wants to stop him hearing the word of God.

But what this incident shows us, it shows us who is ultimately behind all opposition to the mission of Jesus. So in verse 9 to verse 11 the opposition might come in human form but it's the devil who is behind it.

[6 : 21] So this man in verse 9 to 11 we're told in what Paul says he calls him a child of the devil. So his name is Son of Jesus Bar-Jesus but actually Paul's saying you are a son of the devil because you're opposing the message of Jesus.

So he wants to stop the mission of Jesus advancing. And so what he's trying to do here is do all he can to stop the message of Jesus being heard by his boss. And that really is always the devil's tactic isn't it?

It is always to try and stop the message of Jesus Christ being heard in this world. He did it back then and he continues to do it today. Of course it won't always be as obvious as a sorcerer trying to stop it but the devil will always use human agents to do his dirty work.

So it might be for example through the head teacher of the local school who refuses to allow any mention of Jesus in the school assemblies or who will stop any Christian perspective on today's big issues.

Or it might be through the university authorities who refuse to let the Christian union hire one of their rooms on the campus for a meeting.

[7 : 42] Or it might be through church leaders who twist the plain teaching of the Bible to suggest that the Bible actually says something else, something different.

But whenever anyone or anything stops the message of Jesus getting out, whether consciously or unconsciously, we can be sure that the devil is at work to stop people hearing the message of Jesus.

And we've seen it time and time again in Acts that actually it is through opposition to the message of Jesus that the church advances and grows. And so just see how that happens here.

In verse 11, Elymus, the sorcerer, goes from physical sight to blindness, whereas Sergio Paulus moves from spiritual blindness to sight.

Verse 12 says, when the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at a teaching about the Lord. So this is one of the most influential and intelligent men in Cyprus, believers, but he believes and he becomes a Christian.

[8 : 55] But just notice how his conversion happened. He wasn't amazed that Paul made Elymus go blind, which is pretty amazing, you've got to admit. No, he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

That's why he believed, not because of the miracle he saw, but because of the words that he heard. And isn't that what drives the mission of the church forward, whether then or today.

It is the word of God that points to the Lord Jesus. That when it is proclaimed through the power of the Spirit, God grows his church. And so we need to remember that we are on a mission.

And what is that mission? Well, when you boil it right down, the mission is accomplished by the Holy Spirit as the word of God is taught, is shared.

So that people can hear about Jesus. And so our mission is to go out into the world and tell people about Jesus so that they will come to believe.

[10:01] And so you don't need the title missionary to be on mission. We're all on mission if we are part of Christ's church. Every Christian believer is a witness to Jesus Christ.

And every Christian has been sent out into the world, into our own particular sphere of influence, whether it's at school or at university or in the workplace, whether it's through being a retired person or a full-time mom or a part-time sports chaplain.

Whatever it is, God has made us who we are and placed us where he wants us to be, whatever our circumstances, to bear witness to Jesus. Jesus.

And so that's where or how the Lord wants you to live for him and speak of him. And that's why we need to be aware of the devil's tactic in trying to stop people hearing about Jesus because he loves it when Christians just keep quiet about Jesus.

Because if we're forced into silence either by fear or by opposition, then we're really playing into the devil's hands. And so what happens here should encourage us to keep on witnessing to Jesus.

[11:21] Because that is how the Lord uses his people to lead people from unbelief towards belief in Jesus. And so that takes us to our second point.

So the church of the Lord Jesus is first of all on a mission, but secondly, it's on a mission with a message. And that's in verse 13 to 41. Well, what's the message?

Well, the message is Jesus. That's the message. Jesus here is at the center of Paul's sermon because Jesus is at the center of world history.

And so let's see why. So Paul and the missionaries, they sail for what we now know as Turkey. And again, they enter the synagogue on the Sabbath.

That's where they go first. And apparently it was normal for the leaders of the synagogue to ask visiting rabbis, leaders like Paul, to speak.

[12:19] And so they request that Paul give a word of encouragement for the people. Verse 15. And it couldn't have been a more encouraging message than the one that Paul gives.

Because what Paul does is he stands up and he preaches a sermon that points clearly to Jesus. So in verse 17 to 41, we see that Paul recalls their Jewish history and then he reveals Jesus as their Savior and then he urges them to respond by believing in him.

Recalls history, reveals Jesus, and tells them to respond by believing. So basically Paul is saying to them, here is your history and here is your Savior and here's what you must do about it.

And so let's just catch the flow briefly of his sermon because it's a long sermon. And interestingly, it's long because it's the only time that Luke records one of Paul's sermons in a synagogue.

And in it, what Paul does is he shows us how the Bible is essentially one big story, God's story about Jesus who is at the center of this world's story.

[13:37] Jesus is at the center of this world's story. So let's see that. First of all, recall, step by step, Paul recalls the unfolding plan of God by giving his listeners an overview of Israel's history.

So Paul makes it clear that the history of Israel is really the story of God's grace. And it culminates in the coming of Jesus Christ. And what's interesting here is that God is the subject of almost all of the verbs in verse 17 to 23.

So just look down at your Bible. In verse 17, God chose their ancestors and made them great.

Again, verse 17, God led his people out of Egypt.

Verse 18, God endured their conduct in the wilderness. Verse 20, God gave them judges. Again, verse 20, God gave them Saul. Then verse 22, God removed Saul.

Then verse 22, again, God raised up David. Verse 22, God testified about him. Verse 23, God brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus.

[14:48] Verse 23, again, God promised him. So there you go, a summary of the whole of the Old Testament in just a few sentences.

So Paul takes them on this whistle-stop tour of their history to remind them, God has done all of this for you. God in his grace had blessed his people beyond all measure.

And they knew it. All of those in the synagogue that day would have listened to all of this in their Sabbath school, their Explorer's equivalent class. They knew what God had done for them as a people.

And so I guess they were just sitting there nodding their heads in agreement with Paul. Yes, yes, yes, God has done all of this. So Paul recalls that history.

But then secondly, he reveals what it's all about. So Paul, in a sense, drops the bombshell when he reaches the end of their history and takes them up to the present day in which they lived.

[15 : 54] And verse 23, he says there, from this man's descendants, God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus as he promised.

So Jesus is the Savior God had promised. So Paul wants his Jewish audience to see how all of their scriptures are pointing to Jesus. Jesus. So their whole history as a people was leading up to the arrival of their Savior.

But this is not just a history lesson for them, because it's actually our history too. Because God's grace stretches out beyond his people Israel to encompass you and me.

This is our story too. Because the message of the church is the message of salvation. And the salvation is for the whole world. And that's what Paul says.

Verse 26, Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.

[17 : 03] So Jesus came not just to be their Savior, the Jews, but to be our Savior too, as Gentiles. That's why Paul doesn't just show how Jesus fulfills the scriptures, which he does, but he shows how Jesus is firmly set in human history.

And so the message is the good news of his life and his death and his resurrection. And that's what Paul switches to next by saying a few things about Jesus.

Verse 27, he says Jesus' true identity wasn't recognized by the people and so they condemned him and yet this fulfilled the prophets.

In verse 28, Jesus was innocent, but he was sentenced to death. Verse 29, Jesus died on a cross and was buried in a tomb. Verse 30, but God raised Jesus from the dead.

And verse 31, and Jesus was seen by many witnesses. He's saying this is the message of salvation. This is the message about Jesus.

[18 : 06] It's about events that have taken place in history and so they have implications for us. And that's why it's good news.

Verse 32, we tell you the good news, what God promised our ancestors, he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.

As it is written in the second psalm, you are my son, today I have become your father. God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. So see what Paul's been doing here, he's been stacking up the evidence to show how Jesus is the climax of all of Israel's history.

By revealing how the scriptures are all about Jesus, and that's why he quotes Psalm 2, Isaiah 53, Psalm 16, these are all backing up his argument.

And so this was like a drop the mic moment for Paul's listeners. Because Jesus is at the very center of God's story, the very center of God's purposes for the world, the culmination of all of the Jewish Israelite history.

[19 : 23] But also fundamental to our history as a human race. So God has orchestrated all of human history to reveal Jesus to us, to you and me.

So that we, like his listeners back then, should not be in any doubt that Jesus is the Savior. Which means that Jesus is the answer to humanity's biggest problems.

And yet still, so many people fail to see or refuse to accept what God is clearly saying to us in the revelation of his Son.

When we used to live in Edinburgh, I went to a school trip. I often enjoy going on school trips as a parent helper. They were short of parents to go, but the school trip was to the main synagogue in Edinburgh, so I thought this would be good, I'll go.

And one of the synagogue leaders told all the children all about the history of Judaism, picking up on people like Abraham and David and so on and so on. And then afterwards, there was this opportunity to ask questions.

[20 : 31] And so the children all asked their questions and the guy gave good answers to all the children. And then the leader in the synagogue had said to the teachers, any teachers, any parents like to ask any questions?

And I determined beforehand I was going to keep my mouth shut and not say anything. And so I tried. And then the teacher just dropped me in it and said, hey, he'll have a question. He's a minister.

Ask him what his question is. And so the synagogue leader said, oh, you go then. So forced into it, I said, well, what do you make of all the prophecies in your scriptures that clearly speak about Jesus Christ?

And his answer to me was, there are no prophecies about Jesus in our scriptures. And yet what he said in that synagogue in Edinburgh is completely different to what Paul said in that synagogue in Pisidian Antioch.

Because Paul is saying it is all about Jesus. God has revealed his message of salvation in the scriptures and they all point to Jesus.

[21 : 45] And it's good news for the world. And so how can you miss it? Because what Paul's saying here is the message of Jesus is not just spoken about in the scriptures, it's also spoken about in human history.

So that nobody can be without excuse or with excuse by saying that God hasn't been clear enough. God's been clear enough in what he's revealed, but then he's done something about it in history. And that's why Paul calls for this response from his listeners. He recalls their history, he reveals Jesus, and he asks them to respond. And so just look how he concludes his sermon, verse 38 to 39.

Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.

Paul's urging them to respond to the message about Jesus. He's saying that Jesus is the only one who can forgive their sins and put them right with God. They won't be right with God by obeying the Mosaic law.

[23 : 00] That's not how it works. Because they thought they could be justified if we keep the law of Moses. Then that is how we're justified before God. And I guess it's similar today.

People think that, well, we can get right with God. God will accept us. We'll be justified in his sight if we live a good life. And if we do lots of good works, then surely we'll be good enough for God. But Paul makes it clear it's only by believing in Jesus that we're justified before God. Because when we believe in Jesus, our sins are forgiven. And so without Jesus, there's no hope for any of us. Because only Jesus can set us free from every sin that would condemn us. And we all need forgiveness for our sins.

And if we're honest enough with ourselves, we know that we need forgiveness. We know that we haven't even managed to keep the standards that we set for ourselves.

[24 : 03] Let alone keep God's standards and laws. In our hearts, we're well aware of our failures, of our mistakes, of our wrong desires.

As we might like to try and think we can live without the guilt of our sin and our failure and our shame, whether it's what we've done in the past or how we're living now, we might try and carry on with life.

But deep down, it can be difficult to live with. The sin that remains unforgiven. And we all, in a sense, feel this and long to be set free from the sin that makes us feel this way.

But we never can be unless we know forgiveness in Jesus. Ernest Hemingway, the author, has a great short story called The Capital of the World.

And it begins like this. Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco. And there is in Madrid a joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of El Liberal, which said, Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday.

[25 : 21] All is forgiven. Papa. Then a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the 800 young men who answered the advertisement.

800 soldiers had to come and shoo away the 800 men who went there wanting forgiveness. So we know deep down inside we need to be forgiven.

And whatever we have done and however we feel, the hope and the good news is that we can receive forgiveness from Jesus.

By believing in Jesus, we can be set free from that guilt and shame and burden of sin and know the joy of our sins forgiven. And without that, there is no hope, there is no escape from God's punishment.

And that's why Paul warns his listeners of the danger of refusing to respond to Jesus in verse 40 and 41. He's saying those who scoff at the message of Jesus, who think they don't need to be forgiven, will perish.

[26 : 31] Okay, let's close with our final point more quickly. The church is on a mission with a message, growing a movement. The church is not an institution. Let's never think it is.

The church is a movement. And that's why Luke's focus here and all the way through Acts is on the movement of the gospel to the ends of the earth. And so the message of Jesus is proclaimed first in the synagogues, verse 42 and 43, it impacts almost the whole city, verse 44, it spreads throughout the whole region, verse 49, and it results in more persecution for Paul and Barnabas.

And so it pushes them out to a new place and guess what they do? They start all over again and the message spreads even further and wider. So there's no standing still for the church.

The church is spreading the good news of Jesus out to the world, into every place. And that's always been God's plan.

And Paul is absolutely clear on this. Yes, the word of God went to the Jews first, but it was always meant to go to the Gentiles too.

[27 : 41] And so the church is on a mission with a message, growing a movement to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. That's how God does his work.

He does it through his church. And so whether the response to the message of Jesus is belief or rejection, the gospel movement continues to advance.

It marches forward to the ends of the earth. And just see how it happens. It happens one individual at a time.

Look at the amount of space. Look as he narrates the growth of the church. How much time he devotes to the conversion of this one man, Sergius Paulus, compared to all that happens afterwards.

It's because individual people like him and like you and me are enslaved to our sins until we're set free and forgiven by Jesus.

[28 : 44] And so the Savior Jesus was sent to save people. And it's this message of salvation that we have been sent out to proclaim. And so the issue is, well, how have we responded to Jesus?

He's at the center of human history because he's at the center of God's story. So is he the center of my life? Is he the center of your life? He must be.

Because when we believe in Jesus, our sins are forgiven and we're saved. And when Jesus calls us to himself, what does he do? He sends us out into the world on his mission so that we might proclaim his salvation to the ends of the earth.

And that also includes Glasgow. But we don't need to be overwhelmed by the task. Like Paul did here, we can share Jesus with the people around us, one person at a time.

With Sergio Paulus telling him the word of God so that he comes to believe. Because mission is unstoppable when the message of Jesus Christ is unleashed from the lips of his church.

[29 : 56] In our own lives first, then in our families, in our church, in our community, and out into the world. hadWeb channeled to our lives.

And our people have a word on the cross. That's what the world is we need toances it's so that the people have their ones