



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in Our Days

Acts 13:36–52 | Benjamin Hatton
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I'm delighted to be with you this morning and to jump into the journey you're going on through the book of Acts. There's really no better book for a missionary to be speaking out of. It's thrilling to see how God is at work in history. He is accomplishing a great work in our days. If we are not possessed by this story, we're missing out on the things God wants us to be enthusiastic about and to fill our lives with. If we're detaching from this story and instead are possessed by our circumstances, we are missing it. That's what this episode of the story is all about.

Today's episode tells of a monumental miss by a particular group of people. They are taken up by their circumstances and miss an opportunity. But it's also a story about a monumental "all in" jump by another group of people who buy in and say, "We want this. We're in."

In between this monumental miss and this incredible buy-in is a warning. That's where you finished last week. Paul is in the synagogue, and he's saying, "God is at work in history, so take heed lest you find yourself left out and not being part of it." Honestly, I could say I'm preaching to the choir, so let's just skip this part of the chapter and move on. You guys get it. You are all in. You are enthusiastic. You are totally invested.

God is accomplishing a work in our days.

Except for this one fact I would move on. I think you're a lot like me. I tend to forget. I tend to unplug. I tend to live circumstantially. I tend to do my life letting things that are temporary and unimportant loom large in my view. I can stop being impacted by the reality that God is at work in our days.

I remember one of the very first days I was alone in Amdu, Papua New Guinea. We had just unloaded a big MAF airplane—a two-engine Twin Otter. This is an incredible hunk of metal that was built long, long ago, designed to land in a very short distance and take off in an even shorter distance. It's incredible that it could actually get in to the little grass airstrip there. Because of its size, I was able to get sheets of plywood in there to build our house without cutting them in half.

Anyway, this thing landed, we pulled all the supplies out, it took off and the drone of the engine went silent. There I was, standing in Amdu, the very place I wanted to be, but all of a sudden, the circumstances and the impossibility of the situation started to loom large. I was very afraid. I was thinking, "I don't think I want to do this. I don't think I can do this. I've gotten myself into the most giant pickle possible. I want out." But you know what I forgot? I was surrounded by little Amdu people. They're very short and can fit under my armpit, so to them I was a humongous person. At that point, before I could even communicate with these people, God in His grace reminded me, "I am doing a work in your day. Don't forget that."

My reply was, "Oh, that's right, Lord. That's right. You are doing a work. I trust You. I'll stay here. I want to be here." Then just on the heels of that prayer, I heard the drone of that airplane and knew my buddy David was on that plane. He would be getting off with the materials to build his house.

Soon our arms went around each other, and we were saying, "Here we are. We get to be a part of what God is doing. We have no idea how it's going to end up, but we get to be here, and we wouldn't be anywhere else. Let's build these houses." Then I proceeded to put a machete in my knee. Unbelievable. Yet God kept on working.

We need this story today. We need to be reminded that God is at work in eternity, and we need to be possessed by this story. If we allow this story to possess us, we become part of one of the most exciting things—no, the most exciting thing—that is happening in all of creation.

You know, I forgot again. One day after the house was built, I was walking from a garden back up to the house. We were in the middle of learning the language and I was having one of those days when my tongue felt huge. I couldn't say a word right in Amdu. I'm watching my friend's eyes glaze over, thinking, "This guy's never going to learn the language."

I remember walking up this trail, just as tired as can be, and it was like out of nowhere, a flaming dart hit me. Whack! Right in the back of the neck. It was actually a thought—a defeating, crippling thought—of "You can't even hold a conversation with these people? What makes you think you're going to be able to explain justification, sanctification, glorification? Who do you think you are? You're out of your mind. You shouldn't be here." I forgot again. It's easy to forget and then slip out of realizing what God is doing.

Then the Spirit of God came along behind me, saying, "Benjamin, I'm the One Who confounded the languages. I'm the One Who's limiting Myself to people like you. You are a vessel that is of clay only so that the overwhelming glory can be Mine. I want to enable you to do this. You're part of the work I'm doing here. Keep going." I was being re-energized for His work there. Day after day, I watched God's faithfulness in my life.

We tend to forget that God is at work in history and wants us to participate in it. So we need this story. We need this warning because it could be us. We might be the ones who miss God's plan, or it could be said of us that we were the ones who bought in all the way.

Let's go to our story today and be reminded that these are diary inserts. This is not just a string of stories for the sake of it. This is food for you and me—not only to sustain us in difficult times, but to transform, reorient, identify and define our short existence on this earth. It goes by like a vapor, and God says, "I want to use all of it." Let's be exhorted by the Word of God this morning. By way of review, let's go back to Acts 13:38:

³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything ³⁹ from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰ Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: ⁴¹ "Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you."

⁴² As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. ⁴³ And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.

Paul has given these people a message of titanic proportions. The things he was saying and pointing to were absolutely massive. People were mobbing the apostles as they left the synagogue, clamoring for more. The implications are far reaching, and he spelled it out very clearly. It cannot be mistaken.

Do you know what this reminds me of? It reminds me of another character in Acts 13. You've already heard it. Who does it remind you of? Who also was interested enough to use his political position to make sure he got an audience with Paul and Barnabas, because he wanted to hear the word of the Lord? The proconsul Sergius Paulus, a Gentile. He wanted a hearing with these men because he had heard things and was interested. In fact, he was good friends with the Jews, trying to find out more about all of this. He didn't have preconceived notions. He was trying to understand about this God. He had come close, he was hearing new things, and he wanted to hear more.

In the same way, I think this story illustrates the Gentile population in this particular town, in this particular meeting, in this particular moment in history. These Gentiles were eager to hear more. "Is what you're saying true? Could it be that the implications

of what you're saying also include us?" They wanted to hear more. They were around Paul and Barnabas, clamoring for more. They were saying, "At the very least, will you come next week and talk more about this?" So the meeting was set.

I wonder what that week must have been like amongst that Gentile group of people. I wonder if they were going back over his words, asking, "What was it that Paul said? Was he saying sins could be forgiven? Was he saying when Jesus from Nazareth died on the cross that was supposed to happen? And that through that death we can have our sins forgiven? Was he saying that through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ we get right standing with God? We get the righteousness we know we don't have? We can't even get close as the Jews do; they hold that in front of us all the time. Is it possible he's saying this salvation is for everyone who believes—even us Gentiles?"

I think they were talking about those things. I think their hearts were bubbling, and there was a lot of discussion. "I can't wait for next week. We've got to get him to clarify those things. Because if it means what he says it means, it means we're in, too. It means God is doing a work and He wants us to participate in it."

I wonder what was going on in the Jewish camp that week. I wonder what they were discussing. I wonder if they were hitting the books. If we know anything about that society and their hunger to protect tradition, they were probably searching the scriptures and asking questions. They were considering how Paul had used the prophets to show that Jesus was the Messiah and that the cross was essential to dealing with the problem of sin. They were following that chain of logic. They were looking at what the prophets said, beginning to gag on the implications: "Does that mean then that the sons of Abraham—and everyone else who believes—are on equal footing?"

There were two reactions to this concept of God being at work in their days. Paul, the one chosen to proclaim the gospel, was giving that message loudly, and there were two groups who were chewing on it, with two very different perspectives.

Let's read on down a little bit more. Verse 42 says, "*As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.*" Skip to verse 44: "*The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.*" Can you imagine the atmosphere that day?

I think we tasted it a little bit this past week. I was watching a particular news feed channel as they were airing the judiciary hearings for the Supreme Court nominee and the allegations against him. Two pretty polarized groups of people, on a topic that's been well debated, were coming at it from two different angles. The atmosphere was electric.

You know, I'll bet it was something like that. I'll bet the synagogue filled up. It says, "*Almost the whole city gathered.*" There were no numbers given, but I guess what Luke was trying to tell us was that the place was jammed. "Who isn't here? I don't know. Everyone's here. Look at this place." The synagogue was packed out with people, perhaps with standing room only.

Here's the characteristic about the crowd that we need to try to experience. It was probably a majority of Gentiles, or at least 50-50. Then what do we see happening next? "*The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.*" Then verse 45: "*But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy.*" When the Jews recognized how many people were there, they were filled with jealousy. Who else recently was filled with jealousy and began, like these Jews, to contradict what was spoken by Paul? Is there another recent story where someone was filled with jealousy and he, too, began to contradict Paul's message? Harken back. Sergius Paulus, the Gentile, wanted more.

But there was another guy—Bar-Jesus. Do you remember him? He was a Jewish false prophet, a magician, who was also in with the proconsul. He recognized that the heart of Sergius Paulus was being turned. What did he do to prevent Sergius Paulus from believing? He began to contradict the message of grace Paul and Barnabas were speaking.

So Sergius Paulus—the Gentile. Bar-Jesus—the Jew. These pictures are important. These stories form a parenthesis, if you will, pointing toward what is most important—God is accomplishing a work in our days. Take heed so you don't end up on the wrong side of what God is doing. We need this reminder. This is not a story to stand back and marvel at. This is a story that provides an example to exhort our hearts so we don't make the same mistakes. Which side are we going to land on? Are we going to land with Sergius and the Gentiles? Or are we going to land with Bar-Jesus and the Jews?

Israel was given the honor to participate but rejected it.

The Jews "*were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.*" Another translation says they contradicted Paul and blasphemed, basically objecting to every point Paul was making. What point was he making? He was explaining the history of the relationship between God and the nation of Israel relative to the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ and

the extraordinary importance of what happened on the cross. That's what they were attacking. They were contradicting those things, reviling and blaspheming Paul's message. They were saying, "That cannot be the application of this. We stand opposed to what you're saying." They were doing the same thing Bar-Jesus did: blocking the road for the Gentiles to have an opportunity to believe God.

What did God do through Paul on the day that Bar-Jesus stood against him, preventing the way for Sergius Paulus? God filled Paul with the Holy Spirit, then what happened? Paul cursed the magician, who fell blind for a season. Here again in this story, Paul and Barnabas become bold.

We read in verse 46, *"And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.'"* Why was it necessary that Paul and Barnabas first speak to the Jews? Because they were the chosen people.

God picked Abraham over everyone else. In every one of God's promises to him, we see God's plan of redemption for the world. It was through the blessing of Abraham that all the nations would be blessed. Over and over again, from Genesis 12 to Genesis 18 to Genesis 22, we see this being unpacked. You can't miss it. God's intention has always been to redeem the nations. It was the Jews who were honored to be the purveyors of this gospel message. They were chosen to be in on the work of God through the ages. That's why it needed to be spoken to them first. Paul was reminding them, "This is it. This is your chance. God is at work in your day and this is your chance to participate. It was supposed to come to you first." But what did they do with Paul's message? The text uses the word "thrust." They *"thrust it aside."* Basically, they were saying, "If the cross is the message, we don't want anything to do with it." They judged themselves unworthy of eternal life and thrust the word aside. They wadded it up and hurled it back at Paul and Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas were standing there, holding the light of life, the message of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ—the honor for the nation of Israel. So, Paul turned to the Gentiles. The light was taken away from the Jews and darkness came—just as it did for Bar-Jesus. The Jewish people fell into darkness, missing the opportunity to be purveyors of the light into a dark world.

God is doing a work in our days, so take heed lest you end up being a scoffer. That's the warning of this story. It goes on in verse 47, *"For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed."* This is part of God's plan. Paul was seeing this clearly. It was God's command that this message be taken to a dark world. Under an eternal appointment, it was God's desire that all the nations of the world have possession of this message. So, Paul turned to the Gentiles.

My sons and I were recently able to have a bucket-list experience. We went to "The Big House" in Ann Arbor to watch the University of Michigan play a collegiate game of football. This is the *crème de la crème*. If you want to experience college football, go to The Big House. There were well over 110,000 people. We sat on the 40-yard line about three decks up, with our backs against a wall. And the sweetest part of the deal was the tickets were free.

There we were, wearing our Detroit Tigers hats because we didn't have any of the appropriate paraphernalia and certainly were not going to buy baseball caps for \$95. Everyone else had on either yellow or blue. We were sitting there, and you know what? I will unashamedly admit I almost cried as the opening ceremony took place. The marching band—wow! The drum majorette's back-bend, her head touching the ground. The cheers of the crowd. The F-35s flying over so fast we barely saw them, then the sound caught up. It was like the sky was ripping apart. It was scary, but awesome. Then the voice of James Earl Jones booming out through a video narrative. It was amazing.

But you know what? There were two points in the game when there was either an interception or a diving touchdown—I'm not sure which—and the crowd went nuts, with one voice: "Ahhhhh!" It was so loud, so impressive.

I don't know if it was that loud when Paul addressed the Gentiles, but the enthusiasm level was definitely that high. Luke wrote, *"When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed."* That was the response." If you are saying the door is open for us—boom! We're kicking it in and we are all in."

Look at the contrast, then hear the warning again. "Take heed. God is doing a work in our days. Don't be caught missing out on what He is doing. Don't be like these people in a misty darkness, thinking they're right. Be like these people, basking in the light, thrilled with the chance to be all in."

What happened? What happened with this thrill? Did it last for a weekend? Did it die out? Was it seasonal? Let's read verse 49. When the Gentiles heard this, many got saved, *"And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region."*

There were roads, but there were no cars in those days. I can attest first-hand to the difficulty of living in a land where you've got to walk everywhere. But the word of the Lord went out into the whole region. How? Because this was not fair-weather Christianity. These were Christians possessed by the reality that "God is doing a work in our days and we are all in."

They were possessed by it. It changed their identity. It gave them purpose. It defined what they were going to do. It became their legacy. The gospel went out into all the region. It wasn't just on the backs of Paul and Barnabas.

The Amdu territory is long and wide. It is high and deep. There are many rivers. We're trusting that the word will go out in their region and it's going to be on the back of Amdu people to accomplish that.

Paul was given the same honor and rejected it.

The Gentiles, possessing the light and thrilled with the opportunity to be in on God's plan, took the word of the Lord throughout the whole region. The entire region was very accommodating, so it was easy, right? Let's read the next verse: *"And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district."*

So, at the very highest levels, the Jews stooped to the very lowest tactics and persecuted everything about this new movement—The Way. They were as shameful as they could be. Among their peers, Paul and Barnabas had no more honor. Their status was ruined, which was a big deal in that culture. They were alienated and kicked out.

Then it says in verse 51, *"But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium."* Under the incredibly intense pressure of shame, they did not look to reestablish their name and influence in the region. They shook their clothes off and said, "You judge yourselves." Then they left boldly with their heads held high. Between the lines there's an even more incredible testimony. The Gentiles stayed courageously. Paul and Barnabas left, but everyone else stayed put, pushing the boundaries of the darkness back, saying, "We are all in. God is doing a work in our days. Persecution is not going to hold us back."

What does the final verse in our little episode say? It characterizes the ongoing nature of the relationship the Gentiles had with God at this point. It says, *"And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."* Persecution, reviling—but they were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. This is the true mark of the message of grace that God has for us. God is doing a work in our day, He wants to invite us into it and it's not just a "Get in, put the t-shirt on, then go about it in your own strength."

No, when you are all in to what God is doing in our day, it will possess you. It will change you. You will find resources. You will find satisfaction down to the very depths of who you are. In the immaterial stuff of your person, you will find satisfaction and resources in God. You will have joy and the light will continue going out to the darkest places of the land. That's the story, and God is speaking to us through it.

We must take heed ourselves lest blindness rob us of our opportunity.

It's not by mistake that Luke included the blindness of Bar-Jesus in chapter 13. He wants to emphasize that the choice the Jews made left them blind. Could it be said of us that jealousy would take over in our lives? Could the "I want" spirit take over in our lives, causing blindness to the opportunity to be all in on what God is doing?

I know it's so easy for me to fall into that "I want" mentality in life. When I start approaching the Word of God out of a sense of duty, when I start approaching God's Word out of a sense of "it's something I ought to do," do you know what happens to my heart? It turns dull and I forget about the life side of Christianity. I'm just operating.

When I'm dull at heart regarding the Word of God, do you know what's next? When I am dull at heart, I am susceptible to those things the god of this age is doing in our world today. You see, it's not just God Who is doing a work in our days. He has an enemy who is doing a work in our days as well. That enemy will use glittery, shiny things to distract us into the here and now, living temporally. He wants us and will get us with the lust of the eyes. I know I'm a sucker for that all the time. We'll start thinking about our comforts. We'll start thinking about things that are tangible, things we can see, things that feel nice.

Once we start a steady diet of that, we are not going to see all that God is doing. In fact, we will look and see the work God is doing, and it will scare us—because we'll recognize that those comforts have to go in order to buy in. Separation will continue to grow

between us and what God is doing in this life. If we approach the Word of God out of duty, we become dull in our hearts and start buying in to this idea that the temporary things that please the lust of the eyes are actually where we should be investing.

As soon as someone buys in to the things of this world, living for the comforts of this life, they are a sucker for the next hook—the lust of the flesh. Just like the Jews did, just like Bar-Jesus did, we will begin rewriting what God had clearly revealed in history. We'll say, "It's not like that."

If you're anything like me, you'll find yourself rewriting what God says in Scripture, turning it into things like, "I have liberty to do these things. I have freedom in Christ to do these things." But if we're really honest, we're just feeding those fleshly desires for those things that are most comfortable and tasty to us. It's a dangerous, dangerous place to be.

Then the next step after that is a person who has bought into the reality that he steers the destiny of his own life, that he is at the helm, that he gets to call the shots. That's blasphemy! That's like saying, "God doesn't deserve the throne of my heart. That's my seat. I'm going to take over. I'm going to hold the reins.

I have talked to many believers who exude fear of the idea of letting God control the details of their lives." We could never do what you do. Benjamin, you're such an inspiration—you and your children."

Do you know what that says to me? That says, "I am afraid of letting God have control of the very thing that He bought, purchased and owns—my life." That means that person has bought in to what Satan says about life, that the temporary things are the most valuable. There's no joy and no filling of the Holy Spirit in a person who says, "Oh, I could never do that." This story is for us. This warning is for us. The message and the opportunity are ours. God is doing a work in our day. We can buy in, experiencing courage that fills and enables the feeblest container.

I testify to that right here—I am a feeble person. But when you buy in to the fact that God is doing the work and wants you to participate, He will fill you with courage you cannot explain. God will fill you with a contentment you cannot explain. God will give you joy you cannot explain—except for the fact that He's doing an amazing work and you get to be involved.

We have bought our tickets to go back to Amdu on December 10. I can honestly say we are very excited about returning. We're not excited about saying goodbye. We're not excited about leaving the comforts of this land. They're wonderful! But we are thrilled to return to what God has for us, because we want to tell the Amdu people that God is doing a work in their days that is for them too, that there's forgiveness in the Lord Jesus Christ, that through the cross He secured righteous standing for everyone who believes. And if we buy in, we can be filled with joy and the resources of the Holy Spirit, being part of what God is doing in our day.

On the Day of Days, when the Lord Jesus comes back, there are going to be those who shrink back. First John tells us to "live in this certain way so that on that Day you aren't shrinking back." The ones who are going to shrink back are not the ones who snuck into heaven somehow. They're justified. They're secure in their position in the Lord Jesus Christ, but they've got nothing to show for it. It's going to be crystal clear on that Day that they bought in to the wrong work by the wrong god. They invested in the temporary.

First Corinthians 3:10-15 also describes this same thing in another way. Those people shrinking back are going to be those who are there as if by fire. They're going to smell like smoke. They're going to be in heaven, but everything they've put on the altar to say, "This is what I did, God," is going to be tried by fire, and it's all going to be incinerated. There's not going to be anything left there. They'll have nothing to show for it. They will have lived their lives buying in to what the god of this age is doing, not Yahweh the Creator and His work, and they'll have nothing to show for it.

We need this story. We need this warning. And it's written so clearly. Don't be Bar-Jesus. Don't be the close-minded Jews of the day. Be like Sergius Paulus, be like the Gentiles, daring to be brought into a life you will never regret. You will be filled with joy and the Holy Spirit—and this world will be dark no more.

As a missionary family, we can't say enough to reflect the thankfulness we have in our hearts for you. Would you pray for us? Assume that Benjamin is going to forget. Assume that Missy is going to forget. Would you pray that we pick this up every day and ask God to thrill us again with the work He's doing and the fact that we can participate? If you pray anything, pray that. Pray that we'll continue to be possessed by the story of God doing a work in our days, because if we are, then we'll be those missionaries filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. Then the region all around us will be filled up with the story of God and His redemption through the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are going to pray the same thing for you. Living in a land so tantalizingly comfortable, your challenge is greater than ours to see this work that God is doing. Dare to believe that the joy of buying in to what He's doing will eclipse the comforts of this temporary life.

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