



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World

Martyrs, Missionaries & Me: Doing God's Will
Without Fear – Acts 21:1-14

Tim Badal | January 27, 2019



Turn with me to Acts again this morning. We're in our series called "Unstoppable," which looks at the second part of Acts where we've seen God's unstoppable work, not only in the people who were themselves followers of Jesus Christ, but also the unstoppable impact of the gospel throughout the world. In particular we've seen this in the journeys of Paul and his companions as they traveled through Macedonia, Asia and Greece, where he proclaimed Christ to a lost world.

We've also seen how people came to know Jesus and how churches were established and then began to impact the culture around them. Today we're in Acts 21, where we find a passage that is challenging and has a lot of different implications. Depending on how we view this text, we can come up with different conclusions.

I will tell you that putting together an outline for this sermon took probably longer than any other outline I've done. I'd scratch down some ideas, then I'd rip them off the notepad and start again, but I'm confident that what I've ended with will help us find truth and application from this part of God's Word. We'll see several different things taking place in these verses and have a lot of questions, because it appears that God was giving contradictory instructions. The people of God seemed to have one idea, while Paul had a completely different understanding of what God wanted for him. But both believed the Spirit of Almighty God was directing them. How are we here in the 21st century to understand God's will when we hear competing ideas about His will? How can we verify that it's God's voice we're hearing?

What do Polycarp, John Paton, Jim Elliot, John Chau and Christians today have in common? The lives of these men spanned 2,000 years across very different places, yet we have far more in common with them than we realize. The number one thing we have in common is we all have the Holy Spirit living in us and we have God's promises in His Word that He will be with us and never forsake us. Yet these men stand apart from us in their confidence that no matter how difficult their calling or how dire their circumstances, obeying God's will without fear was something they accomplished gloriously. What separates us from them is not what we have at our disposal, but our faith that God might be calling us to a risky life—even a life the world would see as crazy—to pursue the spread of His gospel. Are we really, as we sometimes sing, willing to give up everything we have?

In his song "A Mighty Fortress," Martin Luther put it this way: "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also. The body they may kill; Christ's truth abideth still." Do you believe that today? Do I believe that? Do we believe that as long as we have Jesus and His gospel, it's all we need? And in light of that truth, are we willing to sacrifice everything if that's what God wills? These four men proved to us that such sacrifice is possible.

Polycarp was a first-century disciple of the Apostle John. He was the first church father who was not one of the original apostles. After John died, he continued leading the church until he was arrested as an 86-year-old man. His crime? He declared there was only one king in the Roman Empire and that king was not Caesar—that King was Jesus Christ. He was then brought into the Roman Coliseum where his executioner gave him one last chance to renounce Christ. If he would not, he would be burned at the stake.

They begged him, “Old man, renounce Christ. Just whisper it into our ears.” But this is what Polycarp said: “Eighty-six years have I served Christ, nor has He ever done me any harm. How then could I blaspheme my King, Who saved me. I bless Thee for deigning me worthy of this day and this hour, that I may be among Thy martyrs and drink the cup of my Lord Jesus Christ.” He was then placed on a platform, tied to the post and fire raged around him. Because it would not consume his body, they stabbed him and his blood poured out—for the sake of Christ. Do you have that kind of confidence this morning? We might say, “Well, of course, those guys who lived closer to Jesus would have understood what He was worth.” But how about John Paton?

John Paton was born in Scotland. He was married in 1858 and 14 days after his wedding, he took his new wife to the New Hebrides Islands in the South Pacific. It was known that these islands were inhabited by vicious cannibals who needed the gospel. Many tried to compel him not to go. The final Sunday before he and his wife left their home church, one of the elder statesmen pleaded with him not to go, that such an endeavor to go to such a remote place, knowing the dangers they would face, was foolhardy. He asked John, “Why would you go to a place where you run the risk of being eaten by cannibals?” John Paton responded to the elder in this way: “If I die here in Glasgow, I shall be eaten by worms. If I can but live and die serving the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by cannibals or by worms. For in the great Day, my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.” Wow! Faced with doom at the hands of a cannibal tribe, he left with no guarantees. Do you and I have the faith of John Paton?

Now closer to home, **Jim Elliot** graduated from Wheaton College with a zeal to reach the lost people in Ecuador. He went with a team of other young men, seeking to reach a particular group known for their great hostility—the Auca Indians. They prepared for their first encounter with these people by trying to convince them they wanted to bless and not threaten them. Then after a time, they decided to make their first human contact. As a result of their efforts to spread the gospel to the Aucas, Jim and his team were killed. These were young men with young families who had every reason to live. They could have stayed safely in the United States. Why would they risk everything in what was another “foolhardy” decision? This is what Jim Elliot wrote: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Do we have that kind of faith?

We can go even closer to our own times to just a couple months ago. **John Chau** graduated from Oral Roberts University in Tulsa where he had learned about a group of people—the Sentinelese—who lived on a remote island in the Indian Ocean and who had no contact with the outside world. John realized these people could not have known anything about the gospel of Jesus Christ and it broke his heart. Without this gospel, these people were headed to hell. After years of praying and learning, he embarked on a journey to that island. With nothing more than the clothes on his back and a Bible in his hands, he arrived at the island with this simple announcement: “Jesus loves you and I do too.” He was immediately killed with an arrow. His body was taken by the Sentinelese, eaten, with any remains being buried. Why would a 27-year-old man do something as crazy as this? These are his words, written in a journal he had given to his mother and father: “You guys might think I’m crazy in all this, but I think it’s worth it to declare Jesus to these people.”

Now we turn to the Apostle Paul in Acts 21. For some time he had believed God was calling him to go to Jerusalem. His family and friends—even Luke himself who wrote the book of Acts—tried to talk him out of it. “Why would you go there? It will mean pain and sorrow.” But we’ll learn today that Paul wasn’t foolish.

Human wisdom might argue, “These people could have done so much more, had they been a little wiser.” Over the past months John Chau has been torched on social media and other news media for his foolish decision. But one blogger wrote this: “The scandalous message of the Bible is that Jesus intentionally laid down His life for His people. If this is true, and if John Chau went on his mission to proclaim the good news, then how much more of a friend is he than some arrogant fool. In fact, if the good news about Jesus is true, then all of us as Christians like Chau best show love by risking everything to tell the world.”

You see, there are many in our world—even some Christians—who will say under their breath, “To risk something like that to take the gospel to the world is foolishness, vanity, short-sightedness, ill-timed and ill-placed hubris.” But God sees all these men—and anyone who is willing to take a risk for Him and for the gospel—as gloriously faithful. What we must realize is this truth, whether we’re warm and safe in our comfortable middle-class lives or under constant attack for the gospel’s sake: the cause of the gospel is worth it. John Piper said this: “There are things vastly worse than death. Wasting your life is worse than losing it.”

Why do I tell you all this? First, to remind you that God is still in the business of calling Christians to do great things, crazy and absurd things, audacious things for Him and for His gospel. Let us never grow so comfortable that we look at Acts and at the martyrs and missionaries, then think, “They had something I don’t have.”

Not too long ago our friends Ben and Missy Hatton were in our home. The longer I was with them, the more I was convicted. I realized my friend isn't a super saint but an ordinary man like me, trying to raise a family and facing similar temptations and struggles as I do. Yet God has called him to massive steps of faith. He has taken his family, including his small children, to New Guinea to live in a jungle with people whose language and ways are strange to him. This family is giving their lives to these people with the hope that on some future day they might be able to share the gospel with them.

We have a tendency to view our missionaries as being different than we are, like they have access to something we don't have. But they don't. They have the same Holy Spirit we have. They have the same salvation in Christ. So even though we're tempted to say, "Yes, them, but not me," let us never forget that all of us are called to go into the world to make disciples of all nations. We need to be ready for wherever, whenever, and to whomever God's call may send us.

The second reason I'm telling you about these men is they all sought the will of God. They desired to order their lives, and even their deaths, according to that will. They believed God had directed and guided them to do these audacious things that seemed foolish to a watching world. They listened to the Spirit's leading, but they also sought wisdom from others, and like Paul, they got mixed messages. Some encouraged them to follow God while others told them God would never call someone to do something like that.

So they continued to pray, then they followed God's will. How much more do we need to be seeking God's will in our lives? To be sure, in the mundane events of our quiet lives we will ask God things like where we should seek education, where we should work, where we should live, whom we should marry, and how we should parent. We ask for His direction regarding our calendars and finances. And, yes, this should be part of the fabric of our lives as Christians. But these men prove to us that God also calls us beyond the mundane. How many of us this week dared to ask God, "What would You have me do today? Where do You want me to go? Whom do You want me to talk to? How do You want me to invest my time, my money, my dreams? God, what is Your will?"

Now we come to Acts 21, a passage of Scripture that reminds us God is still calling people to huge steps of faith in the middle of very troubling times. As we look at this text, I want to draw four conclusions that might help us live differently after today.

And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara.² And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail.³ When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo.⁴ And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.⁵ When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed⁶ and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

⁷ When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. ⁸ On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. ¹⁰ While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

Does Paul not sound like the four men we just talked about? You might think this is just another travelogue, but I must say, it's one significant travelogue. Based on what we've just read, what does it mean to do the will of God without fear?

The context of the passage

Acts 21 opens with Paul finishing his tearful goodbye to the Ephesian elders. He met with them to instruct them regarding how they should lead, guide, and protect the church. He also gave them a report on how he had sought to serve the Lord with humility and love, both for the Lord and for the people around him. Paul then boarded a ship to head on to Jerusalem. He had several reasons to go there. First, he wanted to continue to proclaim Christ to his kinsmen, the Jews. Second, he had a gift collected from the various Gentile churches which he desired to give to the church in Jerusalem, who were experiencing a great famine.

Goodbyes and greetings

Notice that our text is full of goodbyes and greetings. You might read quickly and think, "Paul went from place to place saying hello and goodbye." But within these goodbyes and greetings we find sorrowful and heartfelt expressions of love. The people Paul was speaking to weren't mere acquaintances, but people he deeply loved and who deeply loved him.

Years ago, my elderly grandparents, who lived in Iraq, made the decision to move to California to be near their daughter, my dad's older sister. Because it was such an important day, we all traveled to the airport. It was before 9/11, so we were able to go to the gate with them to hug and kiss them goodbye. Then we pasted our faces against the window to watch the plane as it taxied away. One of the few times I ever remember seeing my dad cry was in the car when he looked at my mom and said, "I don't know if I'll ever see them again." Why? Why did we do all that? Because we loved my grandma and grandpa. They meant the world to us.

All the goodbyes and greetings in Acts 21 remind us that the Christian life is not to be lived in isolation. I was struck by the truth that Jesus sought to live life around 12 other men. If the God of the universe desired that, how much more do we need a group around us who love and care for us? Yet the world says otherwise.

In a recent message, Pope Francis said his great fear for today's children is they will have no need of personal relationships, replaced instead by their connections through social media. He urged the children to put down their devices and turn from the lie that they can provide a substitute for real heart-to-heart and hand-to-hand relationships. As the book of Acts screams at us, we need one another.

So let me ask you this: whom did you greet this morning with a hug? Whom did you greet with great love and affection? Who would you want to see before they left, concerned you might never see them again? If there aren't people in this church who are that important to you, we have failed you miserably. We've allowed you to come and sit and go without connecting in community—and that's my fault as your pastor. But it's partly your burden as well, if you've begun to believe the lie that being a lone ranger Christian is okay when the Scripture tells us again and again it's not.

Groups

Second, we see in Acts 21:4 that Paul went from city to city seeking out the disciples. The verb "sought" implies that he was looking intently for them until he found them. If anyone had reason to walk alone, it would have been Paul, who had a clear calling from God. He might have decided that people would just get in the way of his calling. Yet, in every city he visited, his first mission was to find the believers in Christ.

If the Apostle Paul saw the importance of groups, why today—with all our pains and issues and calamities—do we even have to promote small groups in our church? It should be obvious how much we need each other. Every Christian should be seeking out others for closer fellowship. God has called us to live in community. Notice, too, that Paul didn't walk in to Cheers. He sought out true disciples, people who lived under the banner of Christ.

Guidance

Third, we find all kinds of guidance being given in this passage. Paul was compelled by the Spirit. But there were also many people who were trying to guide Paul in his journey decisions. "Don't go there! Don't do this! There must be another way. Don't go to Jerusalem!" Luke mentions Philip the evangelist and his daughters who were prophesying. There was also a prophet named Agabus, who took Paul's belt and started hog-tying himself in the middle of the living room. He then told Paul that bad things were going to happen to the owner of that belt. That must have been a great night for their small group. I hope the neighbors weren't watching that night.

You might respond, "Prophecies like this aren't part of my church experience. People in my small groups aren't telling me things God has said to them." Actually, it happens a lot. And as one pastor pointed out, "When you tell me God told you something, there's nothing more I can say." But what are we to do with that sort of guidance?

Nowhere does the Bible tell us that prophecy is no longer part of our church life today, especially of the type the people were giving to Paul. There are two types of prophetic messages. One has to do with doctrine, and those are restricted to the Word of God. If you ever hear someone giving you a prophetic message that contains new doctrine or claims to be new scripture, tell them they're wrong. That rules out Joseph Smith and the Mormon faith, who claimed to have a message that replaced our Bible and revised the Person, work, and commands of Jesus Christ. That's heresy. Our Scriptures are complete.

These people in Acts weren't doing that. Today we still have prophecy that has to do with direction, not doctrine. The men in Acts believed God was showing them the danger Paul was facing and they felt compelled by the Spirit to warn him to be careful. That kind of warning should be common to us today as well. If we are in tune with the Spirit of God and if we care about one another, our vertical relationship should spill over into our horizontal relationships.

The confusion surrounding the plan

Paul told the people he was going to Jerusalem and the people who loved him said, “Don’t do it!” Paul claimed to have heard from God, but they also said the same thing. So either God speaks out of both sides of His mouth, or what the people were hearing—or what Paul was hearing—is wrong.

Our confusion is compounded by an unknown future.

In Acts 20:22–23, Paul tells the elders, *“And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there.”* How many of us are wondering about the will of God, but He doesn’t seem to make it clear? He’s leading us in a direction, but He doesn’t tell us how it will turn out. Many of us married someone we believe God wanted us to marry, but we really didn’t know how it would turn out. Others of us felt compelled to start families, not knowing what our children would be like or what would happen to them. Some of us have taken jobs we believed were in the will of God, but we didn’t know if we heard Him right.

My greatest anxiety came when I felt compelled to take on the role of pastor here, and I was scared to death. There was so much I couldn’t see or understand. It might have been the shortest pastorate in human history.

Some of us remember the books that allowed the readers to choose their own adventures. At the end of each page, you would have to decide if Billy should go to the ice cream shop to enjoy the dreams of his lifetime in a banana split from the sky or if he should get hit by a bus on the way and die a gruesome death. I always chose the banana split in the sky.

It’s easy to take a step of faith if God has proved to us that everything will turn out fine. That would be our choice. But God didn’t give that to Paul. Instead, Paul was getting the opposite message.

Our confusion is compounded by unsettling advice.

Three times in this text we read where people close to Paul told him not to go to Jerusalem. They were wise and godly people who cared about him. Even Luke, who wrote Acts, lets us know that he was among those who were warning Paul not to go. In Acts 21:14 he wrote, *“And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, ‘Let the will of the Lord be done.’”* What do you do when you believe God is calling you to do something but everyone around you disagrees?

I remember going to one of my closest friends here at the church—he and his wife had spent a lot of time with Amanda and me. He and I went to lunch and discussed the possibility of my becoming the pastor. I shared my vision with tears and passion, telling him, “I believe God is calling me to do this.” His response? “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. The church would be crazy to do this.” I really liked my friend, but I didn’t like what he was telling me. After I left him, I was in great turmoil. Was I missing God’s voice? The day the elder team announced my candidacy for this position, that man stood up and repeated, “This is foolishness.” He then walked out and has never returned to our church. Do you think that weighed heavily on me? You’d better believe it. He’s a godly man. What should I do with that?

Our confusion is compounded by our unshakable calling.

Then to make the confusion worse, we have an unshakable calling. When Paul spoke of going to Jerusalem, he used words like “compelled,” “constrained,” and “led.” This wasn’t a small thing. He knew God intended him to go there. If he didn’t go, he would be disobeying God and would miss God’s best for him.

The clarity to address the problem

What should we do when our future is unknown, when others tell us we’re losing our minds, and when we have an unshakable calling in which we know we’ve heard God? We need clarity. You may be facing this kind of decision right now. Where should you go to school? Do you say yes to this person who’s courting you? Should I serve in this ministry? People are saying one thing, but you believe God is saying something else. What should you do? Here are some truths you should know.

Spirit-directed people can see things differently.

Our passage today is reminding us that godly people can disagree on any given issue. Earlier we read how Paul and Barnabas saw things differently regarding John Mark. Paul also saw things differently from the leaders in Jerusalem in Acts 15. Paul would see things differently when he actually got to Jerusalem and spoke with James, another apostle.

If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you realize that Spirit-directed people sometimes see things differently. Regarding this passage, scholars might try to prove that the people were wrong or maybe that Paul was wrong. One of my favorite commentators on the book of Acts says this: "Paul was being obstinate, proud, and arrogant for not listening to his brother in Christ, to his own demise." Whoa!

I respect that guy a lot, but I disagree. I see a group of Christians trying to understand the will of God. At times this can be very difficult. At times we sense God's directions differently, but even though we disagree, God's will prevails. That's why it's okay for a church to disagree and talk through things.

Spirit-led decisions sometimes lead to suffering.

You've made a decision and you believe it's God's will for you. You might have decided to go to a certain school. You're excited to go there, but from day one, everything falls apart. The teachers hate you. You can't make any friends. The major you wanted to pursue isn't right for you in school, let alone for the rest of your life. You might be thinking, "I must have made a wrong decision."

Or maybe you prayed about marrying, then you pursued another follower of Christ. Everything looked great when you were dating, so you got married. But then problems arose, hard times came, and the devil came to you saying, "See, you made the wrong choice."

Well, you can change schools, but God's Word says you can't change marriages. You're starting to think you missed your true love, the one you could have had. But just because suffering comes doesn't mean God's not in it. God's calling in my own life as a pastor is just as true in the good times as it is in the bad. Sometimes God calls us to suffer and when we do, that doesn't mean we missed His will.

Spirit-empowered Christians will be shown the way.

Paul realized Agabus was right about what he faced in Jerusalem. Even though it would be painful, he believed he was doing what God desired him to do and that God would be with him there. Paul was guided every step of the way as he approached Jerusalem. He was given everything he needed—and we will be as well. The Bible tells us God will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). If we lack wisdom, James 1:5 says we should ask God for it and He will give it to us without finding fault.

When you have a big decision to make, if you'll step out in faith God will be with you. If there needs to be a course correction, be humble and open-handed, and He will direct your path. We don't need to live in paralyzing fear when God calls us to do some radical thing. If things get difficult along the way, it doesn't mean He's left us. He promised us He would never leave us. Paul went to Jerusalem knowing God was with him and that nothing would happen to him that God did not ordain.

Some conclusions that point the way

So what are we to do? There are some conclusions about discerning God's will that we can draw from what we see here. When people are telling us something other than what we believe God is saying, how should we make our decisions? How did Paul get to the place where he was confident that his choice to go to Jerusalem was right?

We discern God's will by holding confidently to the Word of God.

Paul held on to some things he knew God had said, and these were part of his testimony to the people in Jerusalem. First, of course, were the instructions he had heard on the road to Damascus. He also was given a prophecy by Ananias, who told him what his life would be like.

This is his instruction to us today: Be led by the Word of God. The psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:105, "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*" How do we know if we're doing God's will? We take this Book and allow it to guide us. As we read it and meditate on the examples of how God has led others, we can see how we, too, are to go. If you don't know what God is calling you to, or you don't know what it means to do the will of God, start with Scripture. When God's Word says don't do something, you'll know right away it's not in His will. That rules out about half your decisions, right?

I'll be real with you. It's never God's will for me to flirt with another lady. It's not good for my health either. So I can rule that out. It's not God's will that I live in immorality. It's not God's will that I be a gossip. It's not God's will that I live in hatred and sin. That rules all those things out. It makes about half my decisions a lot easier.

We discern God's will by praying continually in the Spirit of God.

Paul had a robust prayer life and we need to as well. Our prayer life can't just be, "Lord, take care of this and take care of that." We need to pray, "Lord, lead me today. Guide me today. Open my eyes to the opportunities around me. Show me where Your heart is beating most in the circumstances around me. Make me aware of the people around me, so I might not live for myself but for You." Those are the types of prayers we'll pray when we're seeking God's will.

We discern God's will by listening closely and carefully to the people of God.

The Bible says wisdom is found in the multiplicity of counselors. If you have a question about what you should do in life—whom to marry, where to move, what job to take—ask lots of people whom you trust and who have lived trustworthy lives. But when they share their thoughts, you need to realize their words are not the actual Word of God. That's why the Bible tells us to test the spirits.

I could tell my mom, "We're going to move the family out West" (which we're not) and my mom who loves the Lord would respond, "I just don't think it's God's will that you do that." Why would she say that? Well, she would be okay with me moving, but not the grandkids. Oh, no! A lot of times we say things as Christians that we think are from God, but they're really the desires of our own hearts. We've got to be careful to navigate those thoughts.

We discern God's will by living courageously for the gospel of God.

I began this sermon by telling the stories of men who risked much. Our text also shows us how Paul was willing to risk everything for the gospel. Let me ask you this all-important question: what are you willing to risk for Christ and His gospel? How much are you willing to spend on the gospel that changed you? How much are you willing to dedicate your life to in the service of the One Who gave it all for you on the cross of Calvary?

Let us be a people, and let us be a church, who long to go out on a limb for God, knowing that He will always reward faithfulness. And never forget, when we step out in faith—just as Peter learned when he stepped out of the boat (Matthew 14:22-33)—Jesus will be there with us. Jesus will be with us, just as He was with those four missionaries and martyrs; just as He was with Paul when he entered into Jerusalem. When Jesus is with us, brothers and sisters, we are more than conquerors in Him.

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