

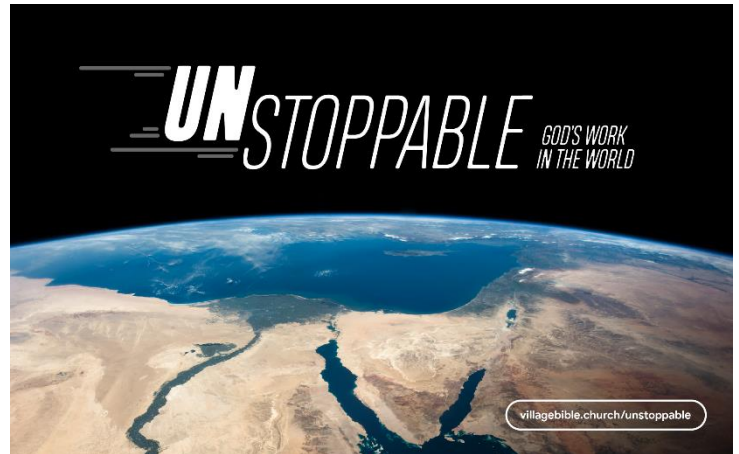


VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World

Know Your Role—Acts 21:27–22:21

Tim Badal | February 10, 2019



Turn in God's Word to the book of Acts as we continue in our series Unstoppable. For those who are new, my name is Tim Badal, and I have the privilege of serving these great people as lead pastor. We've been looking at the last half of Acts, which chronicles the life and times of the early church. We've been following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul as he has been called by God to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a lost world.

As we look at Paul, we realize he had been given incredible gifts and abilities to fulfill a very significant calling. It's clear he was one of a kind. That's part of the reason we're dedicating so much time to studying this faithful servant who obeyed and followed Christ through both good times and bad. But we need to remember that just as Paul was living out his calling, we also have been called by God to serve in the places where we work and do life. We are to be salt and light in a lost world (Matthew 5:13–16). He might not be calling us to deal with all the hardships Paul experienced, or even to the amazing fruits of his ministry. Our lives might be quite a bit more ordinary.

As we look today at another eventful text in which lots of things are happening, we will find applications that will be great for us as well. Paul modeled an unstoppable faith in Jesus Christ, and our faith in 2019 needs to be like his. Given the abilities and personality God has chosen for each one of us, He wants to use us in powerful ways to not only be changed ourselves, but to change the world around us.

This morning we'll be in Acts 21 and 22. It's a large text, so we'll read it in pieces as I go through my message. But just to provide some context, Paul had been traveling throughout Asia Minor and Macedonia, which is modern-day Turkey, Syria and Greece. He had been sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, then planting churches and discipling believers who would then become the salt and light in their communities.

He did this over the course of three missionary journeys, but now he had been led by the Spirit to return to Jerusalem, the holy city of God. There were two reasons for him to go there. First, he wanted to see the people he loved in Jerusalem. Also, he was bringing a gift of money that had been collected from the Gentile churches for the benefit of the Jewish believers there who were suffering through a famine.

We talked last week about the moment when Paul delivered the gift to the Jerusalem church. It seems it might not have gone as he imagined it would. James and the elders focused on some problems the people in Jerusalem were having with Paul. They had begun to hear stories that implied Paul was teaching people to disregard the Old Testament laws altogether, which would put him at odds with the Jewish Christians. Paul did not believe the Gentile Christians had to keep all the Jewish laws, but he made a decision that I think was good for the church and for the mission of God. He went along with the elders' plan for how he could prove his loyalty to the law. Four men were going to take a Nazirite vow and Paul was asked to join them in their oath. He not only cut his hair and spent seven to ten days with them at the temple, but he also paid the bill for all of them.

For Paul, the cause of the gospel was more important than any personal preference he might have had. This is a very important lesson for us. There will be times when we have to do things that aren't easy for the sake of a relationship or for the unity of the church. Paul clearly modeled how to be humble so growth of the weaker brothers would not be hindered.

Now we're picking up the story in Acts 21:27: *"When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him."* Paul has done everything that was asked of him. He's taken one for the team, and what does he get in return? No one was telling him, "Paul, you're the greatest." Rather, he gets more trouble. Nor do we find mention of James and the other Jerusalem elders standing alongside Paul to minister to him. He seems to be all alone. Which again reminds us that there may be times when our best efforts for the advance of God's Kingdom will be met with silence from other believers and bring great hurt from the enemies of God. Just because you do the right thing, just because you bend over backwards, doesn't mean people will throw a parade for you. Paul well understood that doing the hard thing sometimes brings more hard things.

So now a mob began to drag Paul through the streets, beating him and hoping to kill him. Then the Romans who ruled the region got involved. They knew they couldn't allow riots to continue, so a Roman tribune came to the aid of Paul in order to restore order. As he was being arrested, all kinds of stories surfaced regarding who he was. So the Romans put Paul in chains and protected him from the crowds.

Because Paul was actually a Roman citizen himself, abusive treatment was not legal. Rather, Paul asked the arresting officer if he could speak to the crowds. You might imagine him taking this opportunity to call out the mob or even the government for allowing a citizen to be treated like this. But instead we'll see in Acts 22 that Paul took advantage of this stage to speak, not for personal gain or vengeance, but rather to tell the story of how he met Jesus after being a sinner, how Jesus changed his life and what Jesus had called him to do since his conversion.

Today we're going to identify two very practical truths that can be drawn from this story. As we watch Paul's example of how to live in a very difficult time, facing great opposition, we can learn how we, too, are called to live and share our story about how Christ has changed us and made us whole.

Every once in a while, I come across a saying that resonates in my heart. A couple weeks ago I read a quote by Bob Goff that I want to share with you: "The canvas doesn't tell the Artist what to paint. We don't need to call the shots; we just need to receive the colors." Because the A in Artist is capitalized, he's obviously referring to God. God is the One Who gets to call the shots and we're the blank canvas. God has saved us and brought us into relationship with Him for the purpose of allowing Him to use our lives. But here's the problem: Many of us don't understand our role as believers. We tend to think we're the artist, that our lives are our canvas and we can paint on them as we choose. We find colors we like and attempt to create a landscape that pleases us. But we ourselves are the empty canvas, the blank slate. We're to receive the colors God chooses. Quite frankly there are canvasses among us that don't like the colors He uses, amen? We don't like the picture He puts on our canvas.

If I'm honest, I didn't like what God painted on my canvas this week. I didn't like the things I needed to address as a pastor and as a Christian. I could have told God I didn't want that; I'd rather pursue my own painting. But the decision for each of us is how much we allow God to be the Artist.

Paul speaks of this in Romans, using a different metaphor—the potter and the clay. He says, "Clay, can you tell the Potter what to make out of you? No!" We are clay in the Potter's hands, and we'll be molded and shaped into whatever vessel He desires. We need to learn what Paul understood—that even in the most difficult times we're not the ones who should call the shots. Our job is to be faithful to what God is doing in and through our lives. We need to be blank canvasses in the hands of the Artist when it comes to our Christian walk, or our marriages, or parenting our children. We need to be blank canvasses regarding our involvement at church. We need to be ready to accept what God wants to do in our lives when it comes to our work relationships, our job promotions or how we interact with people in our community.

We need to be open for Him to do whatever He wills. If He chooses to bring blessings, we praise God. If He begins to paint a difficult picture for our lives, we should still praise Him. If God allows a mob to drag us into the streets, slandering us and making untrue accusations against us, then we need to praise Him. I'll tell you, though, that's easy to preach, but really hard to live.

That's why I think Luke describes Paul's experiences in detail. As an eye witness to these events, he must have been awed by Paul's response to what he was experiencing. At the end of his life, Paul described his trials as being "poured out like a drink offering" (Philippians 2:17, 2 Timothy 2:4). He was being spent by the One Who was pouring him out. Paul had given his life to God and was

willing for God to use it in any way He chose. It's scary to say this, but Paul was able to say, "I'll go where You want me to go and do what You want me to do, regardless of the circumstances."

That's what Bob Goff is trying to communicate. God is the Artist and we are a canvas. Are we ready to allow God to work in a way that changes our lives? Or are we going to fight Him for the paint brushes? Are we going to fight Him over the colors that will be used? The only way we will find true blessing and purpose in life is if we allow God to have His rightful place and if we understand and accept our role.

Knowing your role helps you know how to impact society.

Let's look at Acts 21:27–31:

²⁷ When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." ²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. ³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. ³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

As Paul was finishing his Nazirite vow, some people saw him and assumed some things. Scholars believe the "Jews from Asia" were from Ephesus—the city where Paul had spent much time—and believers who had followed him to Jerusalem. Even though Paul was only in the temple with some Jews, these men had seen him earlier with Trophimus the Ephesian and they supposed Paul had also taken him into the temple—even though they had no proof. As a result, a mob was incited with the goal of hurting Paul.

I want you to see four things in this story regarding how we can impact society, truths we can embrace that will potentially change our communities, our workplaces and, even our homes.

You do this by being a problem solver instead of a problem starter.

Our text opens with Paul doing exactly what he was supposed to do, but more trouble came his way. When the Jews saw Paul in the temple, somehow they "stirred up" the whole crowd. Three times we'll see that word "stirred" in today's text. As I've told you before, any time you see a word repeated in a passage, you need to slow down and see what the author is trying to communicate. The word "stir" in this context means to agitate, to grab and shake in order to create chaos and conflict.

Could that ever be applied to you? Are you like these men who are stirring up a mob? Do you get some morbid excitement out of seeing others fight? We know why these people hated Paul. They were zealous Jews who did not like that Paul was preaching that Christ was the fulfillment of the law of Moses and all that the Old Testament prophets foretold. But these men did not bring those kinds of issues directly to Paul. They just wanted him dead, so they were trying to find some way to get others to accomplish their goal. They went around agitating the people, then turned around and blamed Paul. It was his problem.

I grew up in a family of three boys. I was the middle son—my brother Chris was older and my brother Joel is just a year younger than me. Chris used to bring his friends around, and they loved to agitate me and my younger brother. These two friends were only children, so they didn't understand the dynamics of sibling issues. They often came over to experience family life at our house, but in reality they would stir up trouble between Joel and me, then sit back and laugh at us. They'd do things, then accuse my brother of doing them. They thought it was fun, but it was really stupid. It actually harmed my relationship with my younger brother Joel.

There are far too many of us here today who get that kind of pleasure out of watching people fight—in our families, with our children, in the workplace, or maybe even in the community. But we should see from what we've read today that it's altogether unfitting for a child of God to be a problem starter instead of a problem solver.

Of the seven things that are detestable to God according to Proverbs 6:16, one of them is "*one who sows discord among brothers.*" God detests those who destroy community by stirring up trouble. Can that be said of you?

You do this by speaking the truth, not speculating.

If we're going to impact society, we need to be problem solvers, speaking the truth instead of speculating. The society Paul lived in was a mob society whose anger was aroused based on what they believed Paul had done. They listened to speculation, innuendo, and all the false ideas that were circulating among them. Later in the text we'll see that when the Roman guards came to deal with

the situation, they really had no idea what story to believe. The tribune was under the impression that Paul was an Egyptian terrorist, part of a group called the Assassins. Paul had to straighten him out. None of the various rumors that were being assumed by the crowd were true.

We might look at this and think, “What an uncivilized generation that was to allow such speculations to have so much influence. How could a mob be riled up to harm someone based only on hearsay and rumors?” We would consider them to be Neanderthals. But then we open our social media and see much the same today. We don’t know if a certain story is true or not, but if it fits the narrative we’re looking for, we go with it. If someone says something about a politician we don’t like, we run with it. If the story helps our agenda, we’ll believe and share it. We’ve haven’t made any effort to see if the story is true. It’s news, so we don’t hesitate to spread it.

I am not a big fan of the social media world. As I was preparing this message yesterday, I got involved in my first tweet-storm, something that had to do with a friend of mine. He pastors a large church in Nashville, Tennessee. While we live far apart, I love seeing what God is doing through this wonderful, godly man. But I was surprised to find on my Twitter feed that he was trending. Usually it’s the President who is trending or someone known nationally. I had to find out what was going on with my friend. Earlier in the day, I had received a text from him, telling me he was in the Chicagoland area and preaching at a church that’s now going through some horrific struggles. He had been asked to preach at this church, because they had so many issues that an outside voice was needed. He agreed to come and he’s probably preaching the Word of God to them right now. But what had happened on Twitter is that gossip and slander against my friend had somehow erupted. None of them had ever met this man whom I know to be a good man, but because he was now associated with a problem they had an issue with, they assumed he was also guilty. What they were writing was so bad that I could no longer stand by idly and watch a good man be destroyed.

We do that all the time, brothers and sisters. We speculate about what is true. We assume the worst about people, whereas the Bible tells us to believe all things and hope all things. Now, are there times when we have to say hard things? Yes. But when we have to speak hard things—and this week I had to do that—we need to be careful that what we say is not speculation. Be sure when you open your mouth that what comes out is truth. Even if we don’t start a lie, when we pass it along, we also become liars. The Bible tells us clearly to put off all falsehoods.

Paul endured great hardship in this mob because of the false rumors they had accepted as being true. Good men and women fall because of false accusations and we need to be very careful to speak the truth instead of speculating. Who are you speculating about right now? Is it a person in your neighborhood whose motives you’re guessing at? Is it your boss or a fellow employee? Is it a family member? Whoever it is, you must search out the truth and speak it clearly, because the Bible states that truth will set you free (John 8:31–38). Speculation puts you into bondage.

Let’s move on in our text with verse 31: *“And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.”* This was not a small gathering. All Jerusalem was in an uproar. Luke used a similar phrase when he was describing Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. His entry had all Jerusalem stirred up. Paul was in a similar spot, with all of Jerusalem in confusion. Nobody knew what was true or what was a lie.

Verse 32 says the tribune *“at once took soldiers and centurions.”* This tells us there were hundreds of soldiers involved, because a centurion was the leader of 100 soldiers and here the word is plural. These soldiers ran down into the crowd, *“And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.”* This began to bring some order into the chaos.

³³ Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!”

Come on, Luke, are you serious? Did the soldiers literally have to lift up Paul and carry him so the mob would not kill him? Luke reports this as though it was like kids going to their classroom, all in a nice single-file line, shortest to tallest, moving along with great order. But that’s not what was going on. Again, we see a similarity between this mob and the mob that was yelling about Jesus, “Crucify Him! Kill Him! We want Him dead. Get Him out of our sight.”

You do this by responding graciously to authority out of respect.

Verse 37: *“As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, ‘May I say something to you?’”* If that was me, I would not have asked for permission.

And he said, "Do you know Greek?"³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?"³⁹ Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people."

⁴⁰ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people.

If you were in the middle of chaos and concerned for your life, could you imagine having the orderly conversation Paul had with the tribune? This models the truth that we are to respond graciously to authority out of respect. Paul had every reason to be mad at the Romans. They had allowed mob action to take place. They were caught flat-footed not doing their job. As a Roman citizen, he was now being arrested, held without charge and without due process. His rights were being trampled.

But how did he speak? "May I say something to you?" The man was surprised to hear Paul's question. "Aren't you that Egyptian rebel?" Paul could have said, "What are you talking about? Are you out of touch or stupid?" But that's not what he said. He simply answered the question truthfully. "I'm a Jew, a Roman citizen." Then he said, "*I beg you, permit me to speak to the people,*" and the tribune gave him permission.

Paul realized that God was giving him another opportunity to preach the gospel. And although he had done nothing wrong, he wisely submitted to the authority God had placed over him. He spoke with respect and clarity, responding graciously and asking for permission to address the crowd.

I think there's a lesson for us here as well. Maybe your boss doesn't deserve your respect, but God has placed you under that authority. Maybe your parents don't deserve your respect, but God calls you, teenager, to honor your father and mother. Maybe your husband or wife has done some terrible things and does not deserve your respect, but God has called us to submit to one another and go through the proper channels to address our relational conflicts. Maybe you don't like what the police did when they pulled you over. But Christian, that doesn't give you the right to cause trouble.

Whatever authority God puts over us, Paul reminds us that we are to respond with respect. How are Christians to change the world around us? We don't start problems, we solve problems. We don't speculate, we speak the truth. We also don't revile or revolt against the authorities God has placed over us, Romans 13 tells us. Paul didn't just preach a sermon in Romans 13, he also lived it out in Acts 21 and 22. When Paul wrote that we should honor the king and submit to the authorities over us, he understood what that meant, even in the most difficult situations.

You do this by bringing clarity in times of chaos.

There's one final application we can learn from this passage. If we're going to change society as Christians, we need to bring calm to times of chaos.

⁴⁰ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:^{22:1} "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet.

This was crazy. This was the same group of people who want to kill Paul, screaming and pushing so hard that the soldiers had to carry Paul out from among them so they wouldn't rip him limb from limb. But then after giving Paul permission to speak, all the tribune had to do was motion with his hand and their cries of "Away with him! Kill him! He's a blasphemer!" were suddenly silenced. Why? They wanted to hear what this guy was going to say. Then Paul began to speak in their language, which they probably weren't expecting. I doubt anyone in that mob really knew who Paul was—and now they were even more confused. "Who is this man?" Minutes before they wanted him dead, but now, "But wait a minute. Who is he?"

Paul's example is so valuable for us—in our neighborhoods, in our homes, with our extended families, in our workplaces—wherever we find ourselves. Are you as a follower of Jesus Christ bringing calm to situations or are you adding fuel to the fire? Are you one who brings truth where there's innuendo? Are you one who brings grace where there's hatred? Are you the one who brings mercy where there is wrong-doing? Or are you one who says, "Let's add another log to the fire. Let's poke it to get it really piping hot"?

Paul shows us how to endure struggles, how to endure when your reputation is being destroyed, how to respond when innuendos and all kinds of accusations are thrown your way. He didn't get worked up or angry. He did say, "Who do these people think I am?" Instead he brought order to the chaos and this is the job for us as the church as well. We should not jump into every fight.

We have a hotly debated issue here in Sugar Grove about a new property just north on Route 47. I received a letter via email with what were at least 50 signatures, begging me as a pastor to speak from the pulpit today about that issue. Even though I would want to speak about this issue, I responded graciously that while I think there's great value in people assembling and expressing

their feelings about their property, the pulpit of Village Bible Church will never be a place to deal with municipal issues. Those are important, but they're not as important as the gospel. I told them I understood their concerns, I also said I would pray that this debate would be conducted in an orderly fashion, using the laws of our land to the best of their abilities. But we aren't going there in this service, because the gospel is more important.

Let me ask you this, brothers and sisters in Christ: is the gospel more important than your morbid interest in getting people riled up? Is the gospel more important than something you post on Facebook? Is the gospel more important than allowing division and chaos to take place around you? Or are you going to speak like Jesus did with the raging sea and bring calm to it by speaking love, respect and honor instead of throwing more fuel on the fire? We have a great opportunity to impact society just by responding the right way, as Paul did.

Knowing your role helps you know how to share the good news.

This all leads to the reason we're to live a certain way within the community and our world. It's so there will be an opportunity for us to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Do we live the way we do so someone can put a badge on our chest that tells the world how great we are? No. The reason we seek to live exemplary lives in our communities, homes, workplaces and schools is so when the opportunities arise, we can be salt and light, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Had Paul been more concerned about himself in that moment, we would not have the first 21 verses of Acts 22, but Paul chose to share the gospel. He chose to tell the people how Christ had changed him. If we are so busy worrying about ourselves and creating chaos in the world around us, we will never be ready to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Paul raised his hand and opened his address to the crowd with these words in Acts 22:1: *"Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."* Paul was telling them, "I'm now going to stand up for myself. Here is my defense." But watch how he defends himself. He says, "Let me tell you how Jesus changed my life."

Every part of our human instinct wants to speak out in protection of ourselves when we are maligned and misunderstood. But Paul didn't do that. He essentially said, "Let people think what they may about me. If this is an opportunity to preach Christ, then I'll take it." He said to the people, "Let me tell you how Christ changed me." That's the good news. It's not just the gospel in its theoretical form which states, "Jesus came and died on the cross to save sinners, rose from the dead to conquer sin and death, and because of that people can be saved." We need to personalize the good news by saying, "Jesus came to save me, the chief of sinners. He went to the cross for me. As He hung there, God put my sins on Him, so that He might pay for them, even though He Himself was innocent. He took my guilt upon Himself and gave me His innocence, so that I might be set free."

We should tell others, "The same thing Jesus did for me, He wants to do for you as well." That's good news. In the words of the blind man Jesus healed, "I once was blind, but now I see" (John 9). The good news wasn't just an abstract observation that God can take care of blindness. The good news is this: "God took away my blindness and my sin."

The story Paul shared with the crowd was his conversion story. We've encountered this story already in Acts 9 and spent quite a bit of time there, so I'm not going to go through it again; we'll be hearing about it again later in Acts 26-27. Luke recounts the story in detail three times in this book.

What I want to show you is how to present, not Paul's story, but yours. We are called to share our good news about Christ. If you are a child of God, you have been called to tell others about what He has done in your life. That's part of what God has put on your canvas.

You might argue, "I'm not an extrovert like Paul. I don't talk in front of big crowds like you do, Tim. I've not been given the gift of evangelism." There are people who are gifted with mercy, but I don't have that gift. Does that mean I don't have to be merciful? Does that mean I can be a jerk to people? No. That means some people have extraordinary mercy that God will use to change lives in a very unique way. We need to be glad for that and appreciate what those people do. But all of us are called to have mercy.

God says we're all to be givers, but there are certain people who are given the gift of great generosity. Does that mean we can sit back and watch those generous people contribute to the work of the Lord? No, we're all called to give. So yes, there are evangelists who are called to that, but every one of us, whether we think so or not, has been called by God to share our story with the world around us of how He has changed our lives. Of course, we're to do this using our individual gifts and personalities. We don't need to be something we're not. We don't need to be the Apostle Paul.

Let's look at some principles that can help whether you're an evangelist or not.

To do this well, you must find common ground.

In Acts 22:1–5, Paul said all kinds of things in an effort to connect with his audience. He called them “brothers and fathers.” He spoke with respect, clarity and honesty to this group of people who, moments earlier, were trying to kill him. He spoke of how he was raised as a Jew. He told them what he thought about Christ before he personally met Him. He spoke of his sin, indicating that he did not consider himself to be above them, nor wiser nor more holy than they were.

We need to be careful about this ourselves, not to assume a great dichotomy between ourselves and the fallen world. We might tell them, “We hate the sin but not the sinner.” But are we honest or are we really rejecting the person who is still in sin? Or we might make the comment, “I don’t know how people can do something like that.” Are you not also a sinner? Do you not know the pervasiveness of sin? Maybe you never dealt with that particular sin, but there is ugliness in all our lives. Have we been saved so long that we’ve forgotten what God rescued us from? We all are still dependent on God’s grace every day.

Paul was talking to a group of people who hated him, yet he sought to find common ground. He didn’t try to agitate them. Instead, he spoke calmly, because he wanted to connect with the people. He did this earlier in Acts 17 when he spoke to the men in Athens.

To do this well, you must state the facts.

When you share about how Christ has changed you, state the facts. Every time Paul shared his story, the facts are the same. “This is who I was before Christ. This is how I met Christ. This is what He called me to when I met Him.” Even though his story after that was incredible, he never points to his own successes or embellishes the details. The fish wasn’t this big the first time, this big the second time, then really big the third time.

Especially if your life-change story is dramatic, you need to be careful just to give people the facts. You also need to be consistent in what you tell from one time to the next. Luke witnessed all three of the testimonies Paul gave in Acts and each time the story was the same.

To do this well, you must focus on Christ, not yourself.

Paul talked about what was happening in his life, but his key emphasis was on Jesus, not himself. The key character in the story of your life change is not you. It’s not me. It’s God. It’s Jesus Christ. He is the One Who was doing the work behind the scenes before you believed. It was Christ Who determined the moment He was going to reveal Himself to you. Wherever you were on your Damascus Road, Christ was the One Who changed you and gave you new life in Him. It’s the Spirit of Christ Who now indwells you, enabling you to live for Him, serve Him and honor Him in all you say and do. Christ is the center of the message. So when you preach Christ, don’t preach as though you picked yourself up by your own bootstraps. You were blind, dead and held captive by the evil one, then Jesus Christ alone set you free. We need to focus on Him. He’s the star of the show.

To do this well, you must be ready for a fight.

In Acts 22:1–21, Paul shared his story and the people were listening quietly. Now look at verse 22: *“Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.’”*

When we share the good news of Jesus Christ, it will not always be good news for everyone else. There will be things we’ll say or stances that we take that will cause the world to respond, “Away with you, crazy person.” We need to be ready for that.

Notice that Paul doesn’t respond with angry words. He well understood that not everyone would receive the gospel. His job was to proclaim Christ to a lost world—and that’s our assignment as well. Let me ask: when was the last time you shared your life-change story? Who works with you or lives with you but has not heard it? Who in your school or neighborhood does not know how you have been changed by Jesus Christ? This is a story we should be telling over and over and over again.

Knowing your role helps you know how to spend your life.

A few verses in today’s passage help us understand how to spend our lives. Paul shares something I believe is incredibly helpful as we leave this morning. In Acts 22:14–16 we read what God spoke to Paul through Ananias: *“The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”*

I’ll bring you back to the illustration I started with. Are you the empty canvas on which God is painting His picture? You will know if that’s you when you’re ready to receive the colors God has for you and are living out these four things.

Your life will be spent well by longing to know His will.

God our Father has appointed you to know His will. Scripture clearly teaches that His will is for you to live upright, to be holy and to be in relationship with His Son. Do you see knowing the will of God as being the greatest knowledge in the world? It's this knowing that will set you free. Or are you busy pursuing your will, your plans, prerogatives and desires? If so, then you're the artist. But God wants each one of us to long to know His will.

Your life will be spent well by always looking to Jesus.

Are you looking to Jesus? The Bible says if we look to Him, we'll see the Righteous One. Are your eyes so much on yourself and what you're painting that you miss out on Jesus? Or do you wake up each day saying, "Jesus, I want to see You. Jesus, I want to see You work in my life. I want to see You at work in the lives of the people around me. I want to see you at work in the opportunities You bring to me." You're an empty canvas when you are always looking to Him.

Your life will be spent well by listening to His Word.

You're an empty canvas when you listen to His Word, hearing His voice, so you can be a witness to Who He is. You know if you are listening to the Word of God and are then witnessing to what you hear. Does that make sense? You take in what you hear, but God says it involves more than just taking in information. It also includes your sharing that information with others.

Paul was told exactly this: *"The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard."* When you see God move in your life, when you see God changing people, you will want to share that with others because that's what listening involves. It's not just hearing something but taking what you hear and doing it.

Your life will be spent well by living obediently.

Paul was asked, *"Why now do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."* The book of Acts is really clear that if you call yourself a child of God, the number one step of obedience is not that you run away from sexual immorality or that you no longer have issues with your mouth or that you're no longer unkind to people. The number one step for every person who has called upon the name of the Lord is to be baptized. If you're a child of God, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, if you are on your way to heaven because you've called upon the name of the Lord and been saved, then God says the first thing that Christians ought to do is be baptized. With all grace, love and humility, I want to say if you are a follower of Christ and have not yet been baptized, you are walking in disobedience to your God. To echo what God told Paul, "Why do you wait?" Obey God. Take that first step of obedience.

Why would He want us to start there? Because in baptism, we are witnesses to a watching world of what God has done. God has allowed us to take the colors He's painting with so that we can share the picture He's painting on the canvas of our lives. We need to show that canvas to the world, saying, "Look at what God is painting. Look at what God is drawing with my life. Can I declare to you that God wants to do the same in your life?"

Are you longing to know His will? Are you looking to Jesus? Are you listening to His Word? Are you living obediently, especially regarding baptism? It is then and only then that you will be the picture God wants you to be. We need to know our role in the good, the bad and the ugly of life. Let's pray that we will live out that role in the days to come.