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The Unstoppable Church

I Will Build My Church

Acts 15:36-16:40

Pastor Bryan Clark

This week *Time* magazine featured a cover article about the rising popularity of the prosperity gospel. Basically this is a message that seeks to motivate people to follow Jesus because Jesus wants to make you healthy, wealthy and prosperous. It's actually a message that sells very well in a consumer culture. It's really not hard to fill up a building if you just tell people what they want to hear. But as soon as you read through the Gospels you quickly realize that's not what Jesus said. Jesus said, "If you're going to follow Me, you've got to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me." Jesus said, "They persecuted Me. They're going to persecute you." Jesus said, "You better count the cost if you're going to follow Me."

I think we understand that. I think the overwhelming majority that walk through these doors understand that, and they want to be Christ-followers and want to be a part of accomplishing the mission. The problem is what often seems so compelling on Sunday seems so confusing on Monday. We get out there in the trenches and we're not exactly sure. How do we do this? We're not sure what's God's part and what's our part and how do we make it happen?

In my opinion one of the best passages in the entire New Testament for reminding us of some of the basic principles of God's part and our part and what this looks like is our passage this morning in the Book of Acts. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Acts 15:36 and we'll go all the way through Chapter 16. Chapter 15 was actually a watershed moment for the Church when the Jerusalem Council determined with one mind that the message of the Church, the message of the Gospel is that salvation is by grace through faith. Out of that there was great celebration, and we pick up the story in verse 36.

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (Acts 15:36-41, *NASB)

This is quite a shock coming out of what happened in Chapter 15 and the encouragement and the excitement. Paul and Barnabas have been a dynamic missionary team, and this is really the last thing we expected. It's interesting to read the commentaries on this passage. There are some people that just can't bring themselves to acknowledge that there was any fault in any of this—that Paul and Barnabas were both filled with the Spirit and this was just God's plan and really no problem.

But that's simply not the way the text was written. As a matter of fact, the verb tenses would indicate that this was an argument that went on for some time. The language is clear. It was a sharp disagreement.

Barnabas wanted to take along John Mark. If you remember from Chapter 13 of Acts, John Mark was with them once and he bailed out. Nobody quite knows why. Some people speculate when the

missionary team started going to the Gentiles, John Mark just couldn't take that and so he bailed out. And once the decision was made by the Council defining the Gospel, he wanted to join up again.

Paul said, "You know, I don't want him to go. He bailed out once, and he's not coming." So they were at an impasse. Eventually there was the first Church split. And Barnabas went one way and Paul went the other way. And we'd have to say this isn't exactly a shining moment for the New Testament Church.

I find myself asking the question: Why does Luke record this? I mean this is a good thing maybe to just gloss over and move on to the story. Well, the answer is the same reason God reports the struggles and failures of His people from Genesis to Revelation. The reality is God has never used perfect people to accomplish His purpose. God has always used the strugglers, God has always used the fallible, and God has always used those who have their ups and downs. There are times when we don't do the right thing, and we don't do the right thing the right way. And there are times we all fail along the way.

If God limited Himself to just using people that had it together all the time, the job would never get done. Sometimes when we're thinking about God using us to be part of accomplishing the mission, I think we make it too complicated. And one of the first struggles we have is we struggle with our own inadequacy. You know, "I don't know enough theology. I don't know the Bible well enough. Someone's going to ask me a question I can't answer. I'm kind of a mess up. Yesterday was good and today is lousy."

We look in the mirror and we think *how can God possibly use me?* And that often renders us ineffective. The reality is, of course you're inadequate. We're all inadequate. We've reminded ourselves on many occasions, the Church is a gathering of sinners and losers and misfits redeemed by the power of Jesus.

God has always used struggling, less than perfect people to get the job done. You just have to believe that by faith. When you look in the mirror, believe that through the power of the Spirit, God can use you to make a difference in order to change the world.

Acts 16:1:

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily. (Acts 16:1-5)

Two weeks ago in our review, I reminded us that this idea of the Church increasing daily is a scene that comes up over and over and over again in the Book of Acts. Once we're clear what the mission is, there is no way for the Church to be faithful to the mission without growing numerically. We are constantly reaching lost people and bringing them in. They're built up in their faith, and they go out and reach more people. That's the heart and soul of the mission. It's really not possible for a

church to consider itself faithful, if it's not increasing daily in the number of people that know Jesus. So that theme comes up over and over again in the Book of Acts.

Paul goes to Lystra. You remember the last time he was there (Acts 14) they drug him outside the city limits. They stoned him, and they left him for dead. And God miraculously raised him up, and Paul left town. So it couldn't have been a pleasant thought to go back to this same city to visit.

But he did, and he met Timothy. Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Greek father and was a man highly spoken of by the people and Paul thought he'd make a good addition to the team. But in order to add him to the missionary team, Paul had him circumcised. And you have to ask the question, "What's up with that? I thought the Council just made the decision that they don't have to be circumcised?"

Paul was not circumcising Timothy to make Timothy more spiritual in order somehow to observe the law or merit some favor with God. But Paul understands that they are going to a Jewish audience and these Jews are so highly legalistic that in order to deliver a message of grace and to tell them that they are no longer subject to the Law, we have to remove all potential obstacles so they'll listen to us. So in essence Timothy had to be circumcised in order to remove the potential obstacle so they could proclaim the Gospel in such a way that these legalistic Jews would listen. So this is the irony of it. Paul had Timothy circumcised in order that Timothy might deliver a message that you don't have to be circumcised.

But there was a reminder that even though we are free in Christ, we are not free to do as we please. Our freedom is always subject to the mission. And I'm always examining my life for anything within my life that may be OK to do within my freedom but may be a potential obstacle to someone else hearing the message. And I willfully choose to lay those things aside in order to maximize the potential for somebody else to hear the message of the Gospel and enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

It's a confirmation that that is what the Council was talking about in Acts 15:21 when they identified those potential areas of offense. Verse 6:

They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:6-10)

What are the basic principles that we need to understand in accomplishing the mission. Number one: I'm inadequate. I know I am only made adequate by the Spirit of God. Number two: Am I willing to sacrifice to remove any obstacle in my life to the proclaiming of the message? Number three: To understand ultimately I must be led by the Spirit of God.

Whether you're talking about a church or whether you're talking about an individual, it isn't ultimately about our clever strategies. It isn't about our methods and our programming. It isn't about some sort of plan we put together. Ultimately all those things must always be subject to the leading of the Spirit of God.

Paul and company planned to go to Asia. Asia needed to hear the message. It made perfect sense. But for whatever reason the Spirit of Jesus would not let them go there and redirected them to Macedonia which would be the first contact with the European continent.

Now there's lots of speculation in terms of how the Spirit of Jesus did that. Some people think it was through an illness that Paul suffered. One of the interesting details in this particular text is in verse 10 Luke goes from talking about the missionary team as "they" to talking about it as "we". It's clear from verse 10 that Dr. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, becomes part of the missionary team. And he stays on the team for several chapters here. And because he was medical doctor, some people speculate Paul had physical problems and that is why Luke joined the team. That may or may not be the case. I think the relevant point here is that they were going one direction and the Spirit of Jesus intervened and sent them a different direction.

Yesterday Jeff was sharing with me a series of pictures of 298 India church planters that have come on board, been trained and funded over the last three years. It's really a remarkable thing. You start to look at the scope of this – there are more Berean churches and districts in India now than there are in the United States. It's been a remarkable three years.

One of the things I've been reminded of is that hasn't happened because we've been so clever, because we've had such a good strategy, because we've figured everything out. Jeff has done a remarkable job of putting this together, but he would be the first one to tell you that there was a time where he was very discouraged. We had a heart to reach India, and it seemed like we reached one road block after another. And in what appeared to be a chance meeting, but which was really orchestrated by the Spirit of God, Jeff happened to engage in a conversation with George Nynan, director of India Campus Crusade, and there between the two of them a partnership was born that has now become a part of this movement in India over these last several years.

Nobody was planning that, nobody was strategizing that, it just was something the Spirit of God did. And because that's where He was leading, there has been tremendous fruit as He has prepared the way.

Whether you're talking about the next church we're going to plant, whether you're talking about being called to somewhere else in the world, or whether you're talking about walking across the street, all need to be led by the Spirit of God. We can't lock into our heads that we have our idea and not be submissive and surrender to the Spirit of God. Everyday is the question, "God, who do You want me to talk to today? Who do You want me to make contact with?" And be responsive to that – just be sensitive to that.

So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:11-15)

Now one of the side notes of this particular story is something we've brought to your attention on numerous occasions in the Book of Acts and that is how Luke seems to go out of his way through the Spirit of God to emphasize the value of women in this new movement called the Church. Understanding how women were perceived in the first century, this was really quite a radical thing. And I think the stretch by faith to include the Gentiles in this movement was the same sense of being stretched by faith to include women in a new found value in this movement called the Church. So you have one of the most significant church plants in the New Testament initially founded by this very successful businesswoman by the name of Lydia.

Paul and Silas go down by the river, and they find a prayer meeting. And they begin to share Jesus, and it says Lydia was there and she was a worshipper of God. It's kind of a generic term. What it basically means is to the degree that she understood the truth about God, she responded to it. She was hungry, she was a seeker.

Sometimes people ask the question, "If people have to go to God through Jesus, through the Gospel, then what do you do with those people who live in tribes in remote places of the world where they will never have a missionary and they'll never have a Bible and they'll never have the opportunity to hear—what about those people?" Actually, Romans 1 and 2 answers that question. God has revealed Himself through creation and God has revealed Himself through the conscience. And to the degree that people respond to the light they've been given, God promises to give more light.

God has His ways of delivering a message to people. I am convinced there will be hundreds of thousands of people in heaven to whom God revealed the message of Jesus in ways we knew nothing about. God has no limitations in delivering the message. What matters for every person, no matter where that person lives, is to respond to the light that has been given and God will give more light. So what's being said about Lydia is she had responded to the degree of light she'd received, she was seeking after God, and she was a worshipper of God. So when Paul laid out the message of Jesus, she immediately responded to it. The Lord opened up her heart and she was immediately saved. And they were baptized.

One of the great reminders of this text is that there is nothing that I can do to save anyone. There is nothing I can do to save someone through my clever presentation, through my smooth presentation of the Gospel, through my ability to answer all the questions. It doesn't have anything to do with that. It has to do with the Spirit of God lifting the blinders off their eyes, the Spirit of God opening up their heart to respond to the message of truth. God does the saving; my responsibility is to faithfully, lovingly, caringly present the message.

Now when you think about that it takes all the pressure off. Sometimes we work ourselves into a lather thinking somehow we have to be able to answer every question. And somehow we have to get into an argument and be so persuasive and figure it all out. And the reality is that none of that is true. All I have to do is be sensitive to the Spirit's leading. And when God leads me to do so, lovingly, caringly present the message. And what they do is then between them and God. I don't need to argue with them. I don't need to manipulate them. I don't need to try to force something that God isn't doing. That's where we get ourselves into trouble.

It's a little bit like fishing—waiting for the fish to bite. You're just being faithful to your part, and God does the rest. And that's exactly what happens here. The reason the Spirit of the Lord led them to Macedonia is because God had prepared Lydia's heart. And she heard the message, and she responded.

It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment. (Acts 16:16-18)

We continue to march on, and they encounter this woman with an evil spirit. It's actually in Greek 'the spirit of the python' which is reflective of one of the Greek gods in this particular city. And she's following them, and for days she's proclaiming this message. And when you read the message you say, "Hey that's pretty good, what's the problem?" Well, the enemy is very clever and the enemy knows that if I proclaim the right message through the wrong messenger then I discredit the message. The enemy is very clever: Present the right message through the wrong messenger and the message is discredited.

And so people are listening to that, but they're considering the source, and the message is being discredited. And it's annoying Paul. So finally, in the name of Jesus, he casts that demon out and the Church marches on. There is a reminder in this that we do have an enemy and the enemy wants the Church stopped. But the enemy is nothing more than an annoyance, and when he gets in the way, through the power of God, God sets him aside. And we continue marching on.

But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans." The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. (Acts 16:19-24)

Now up until this part of the story, everything's going along nicely. Are we adequate? No, we aren't, but the Spirit of God makes us adequate. We need to be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the mission. And then we need to be led by the Spirit of God. The Lord opens up hearts so that they respond to the message, and when the enemy gets in the way the Lord takes care of him.

Everything is going along nicely until now. Then what happened? Did God take a lunch break? What exactly happened here? You'd have to admit this would be a very difficult experience. I mean they were beaten until they were bloody, and then they were thrown into the prison. And the language was clear that the intent was to throw them into the deepest darkest part of the jail, the inner jail. We'd say 'maximum security'. And in addition to that, put their feet in stocks—this had to be miserable.

And the tendency is to ask the question, "God what happened here? Why did this have to happen? You know, poor me. I'm out there doing the job proclaiming the message and this is what I get for that?" One of the things we have to understand and have to come to grips with is that the light of the Gospel shines most brightly in the darkness. And sometimes it is necessary for God to allow us to spend time in the storms and the prisons of life in order for the light of the Gospel to shine that someone else might see it and have their life changed forever by the power of Jesus.

See that's what's so ridiculous about the prosperity gospel. When everybody is healthy, wealthy, and prosperous, nobody has a need. Everybody's fine. But it's in those times of darkness where the light of Jesus, the reality of the presence of Jesus, manifests itself in such a way that people recognize there's something different about that person—which is exactly the perspective that Paul and Silas had.

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:25-30)

What a remarkable story. Paul and Silas are beaten and bloody, their feet are in stocks in the maximum security part of the jail, and they begin singing praises to God. They understood that God is still in control. God hasn't lost control. And they can continue to build the Church in whatever circumstances and whatever environment they find themselves.

When we go through the storms of life instead of losing our faith and saying, "God, why does this have to happen to me?" We need to ask the question, "God, how might You use this to let Your light shine that somebody else might come to know Jesus as Savior?"

So, they're singing praises, and Luke is quick to tell us the prisoners were listening. They were probably listening and looking at one another and rolling their eyes and thinking, *What is with these two?* I mean I would have to say they've probably never seen such a thing in prison. And all of a sudden there is this great earthquake, and the doors are open. And in one of the greatest miracles I think in the text, nobody leaves! I mean you would have to think the night before that's all they talked about is how to escape! These were prisoners. These were bad boys, and the jail doors are kicked open and nobody leaves. Something was going on there to such an extent that nobody wanted to miss it. So they stayed.

The jailer comes along, and he's going to kill himself. He knows that if the prisoners are gone, he's dead. And Paul stops him and says, "Hey we're here. We're all here. Nobody left!" And then his question—he's so stunned by all this—is, "Sirs, what I must do to be saved?" Do you know what he's asking there? "What must I do to have what you have? What must I do to be like you?" That's really what's going on here. Through the events that had transpired in that prison, he had seen in the darkness, "I don't know what these two have, but whatever they have it is real and powerful, and I want it."

The reality is it's typically in times of darkness that our light is going to shine most brightly. As a matter of fact, I have found over the years that this is often what separates those people who truly have a relationship with Jesus from religious people. In moments of crisis, religion lets them down. But they look over at people that have the life of Jesus, and they say, "What do you have that I don't have? What do you have that I'm missing?"

That's often a turning point for religious people. It isn't very likely that in times of health and wealth and prosperity that somebody's going to run up to you and say, "What must I do to be saved?" because in those moments, everybody's fine. It's in the moments of darkness, it's in the

prison times of life, when there's suddenly a reality that there's something within you that's real and it's alive and it's compelling. This is when people are most likely to say, "What must I do to have whatever it is that you have?"

They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household. Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, "Release those men." And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace." But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! [In other words, "I don't think so!"] But let them come themselves and bring us out." The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed. (Acts 16:31-40)

The Philippian jailer and his wife come to faith in Christ, and the next morning the magistrates get word to the policemen to go tell Paul and Silas that they can go. And message comes and Paul tells them, "By the way, you do know we're Romans don't you?" because everything that they had done to them was illegal to do to a Roman citizen. As a matter of fact, the magistrates were in big trouble. This is a Roman colony and they immediately knew, *We are in trouble here*. So Paul says, "You think you can do this to Romans—what's illegal—and then just cover it up and ask us to leave? I don't think so. Why don't you have the magistrates come and chat with us a little bit?"

So they do. And suddenly Paul and Silas are calling the shots. And the magistrates come into the prison and they're begging Paul and Silas to leave and, you know, you can imagine the dialogue. "We're really very terribly sorry, and we didn't know, and here have a free travel guide from Philippi."

And suddenly everything changes. Paul and Silas kind of meander out of prison, they wander down the street to Lydia's house where the church of Philippi is being born, and they spend some time talking to them and encouraging them. And when they're good and ready, they just meander out of town.

And I'm guessing when Luke wrote the words to this story he had a smile on his face. Because the reality is that those magistrates were sure that, *If we put these guys in the deepest, darkest part of the jail we'll stop this thing*. And the story turns upside down to where there's a realization that, *Hey, you can't stop this. This is God and there is no way to stop it. God is in control from beginning to end*.

Jesus said I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And whether you're preaching in the streets or in a prison cell, the Church is being built and you can't stop it.

There is a reminder in this story that we're all inadequate. Tomorrow morning you're going to remember this message, and you're going to think, I just don't feel adequate for this. We all feel that, but the reality is you're not adequate. The Spirit of God will empower you.

We're willing to sacrifice whatever is necessary to try to remove unnecessary obstacles in order to proclaim the message.

We understand that what's important is that the Spirit is leading us. We're just sensitive to that, trying to find those people whom He has prepared to hear what God has to say. And we understand that we can't save these people. That's not our responsibility. I just need to be faithful, and, in a loving caring way, just put the message out there. And what happens from there is up to God.

I understand that if I'm about the mission of the Church the enemy's going to get in the way, and he's an annoyance. And God's power will get him out of the way, and we keep marching on.

But I also understand that oftentimes the light will shine most brightly in the darkest moments of life. And in those circumstances I have to be asking the question, "How might God use this? How might God use this time in prison to let the light of Jesus shine so that somebody else may come to know Jesus as Savior?"

So let me ask you the question this morning: If God were to take you through a storm, through the darkness, through the prison experiences of life, in order that His light might shine more brightly, that one more person would come to know Jesus as Savior and be changed forever, would that be worth it to you? Or let me ask it this way: What if that one person was your spouse, was your wayward child, was your mom or dad, was your dearest friend, what would that be worth to you? See the reality is if the light is going to shine, sometimes it's going to shine in times of darkness so that somebody else might see and believe.

But, you know, sometimes we go through periods of darkness because the light needs to shine on us, because those are the moments when God finally gets our attention and changes us. I'm reminded of another prison story, very different from the Book of Acts.

Ken found himself in prison because he deserved to be there. He had committed a crime. But it was in that prison cell that God met him, and the light of the truth of Jesus penetrated his heart. And there in that prison cell, Ken was changed. He was changed forever. Over the last several years I've had the opportunity to work with Ken on many occasions. As a matter of fact, in the month of July we did three weddings together in a week's time. And I can tell you that God has radically changed Ken's heart. And I will tell you this—it is a delight to have Ken and Mary as part of our church family here at Lincoln Berean. Listen to Ken's story.

Ken: I had always had two goals in my life. One was to be a State Trooper, and the other was to fly. And in November of '79 I was accepted on the State Patrol. In '88 I was accepted into the Air Wing Division and in that process I was promoted to Sergeant and then was promoted to Division Commander of the Air Wing Division for the entire State.

I had it all. I had the authority, I had the respect, but the reality was I was out of control. I was an angry, lonely, selfish, lustful person and my family really knew what was going on in my life.

In April of 2000 I was arrested for a sex crime. After being arrested, I had to resign from the Patrol. During that time I was separated from my wife. My family was separated from me, and I was truly afraid. And during that time I felt the most alone that I've ever been. I've never experienced such separation. Being on the Patrol and being in such power, being so respected, and now I had nothing.

Eight months after my arrest, I was sentenced to one-to-three years at the Lincoln Correctional Center. Can you imagine sitting in a jail cell and every night watch the sun go down through razor wire? I had total freedom. I was in control, and now I'm behind a slammed door.

During the time there, God was teaching me to be patient with Him and to realize that He is in control and not me. That He had ultimate power over all things. And it was difficult for me to accept that at first. Yet the concrete, and the bars, and the razor wire reminded me of it everyday.

But God used those times in my life to break my heart, to be used by Him. I hate what I did, I hate how I got there, yet I thank God that He broke my heart to bring me to the point where this day I can tell you that's where God wanted me to be at that moment in my life because He had a work to do in me. And I had to be there in order for it to happen.

In June of 2002, I finally got out of prison. I was afraid of what I would see on the outside. And if you want to see grace, look at Mary. She's an absolute picture of God's grace. She stood beside me, she forgave me, she was patient with me, and after a long time of growing closer together and learning who I was, we were remarried. Pastor Kyle Helmink said that that was the only wedding that he ever cried at. We were all crying because God had truly worked a miracle.

Today God is continuing to work in my life and in the life of my family. He is restoring my family back to whole. I have the privilege of working with other men that struggle with pornography. I work with men that are still in prison. It really is a privilege to be used by Him in this way. I never would have chosen this for my life story, but God knew what it would take to bring me to the point where He could use me. I'm so thankful that He's in control of my life and not me.

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Study Questions
The Unstoppable Church
I Will Build My Church
Acts 15:36-16:40
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What does Jesus call us to as His followers, and how should that affect how we process the ups and downs of life?
2. Do you believe the difference Jesus makes in our lives is more evident in the sunshine or in the storms of life? What are the implications of this if Jesus is going to use us to get the mission accomplished?
3. When we think about the mission Jesus has called us to, what is our part and what is His part?

Do we ever confuse who is responsible for what? What is the result of that confusion?

Bible Study

1. Read Acts 15:36-41. Clearly the language used indicates this was not a pleasant parting between Paul and Barnabas. What do we learn from this?

Why do you think the Spirit inspired Luke to include this unfortunate divide between Paul and Barnabas?

2. Read Acts 16:1-5. Compare with I Corinthians 9:19-23. Why does Paul circumcise Timothy?

What does it mean that our liberty is always subject to the mission Jesus has given us?

Do we sometimes have to be “circumcised” in order to be heard when we preach the message that “circumcision” is no longer necessary? What might be a modern day example?

3. Read Acts 16:6-15. Paul wanted to go to Asia but God redirected him to Macedonia. What do we learn from this as it relates to accomplishing our mission?

What is the danger in becoming too dependent on our strategies?

4. What does the story of Lydia teach us?

What is God’s part and what is our part?

Compare with II Corinthians 4:1-7. What happens when we try to do God’s part in the conversion process?

5. Read Acts 16:16-40. Most of us have never had someone run up to us and say, “What must I do to be saved?” What has transpired previously that caused the jailor to ask such a question?

Would the jailor have asked such a question if Paul and Silas had not been beaten and imprisoned or if they had not been praying and singing hymns?

6. Paul and Silas’ imprisonment led to the salvation of the jailor and his family. What would you be willing to endure if it led to the salvation of one other person?

Is it possible that God has a greater purpose for the struggles and hardships of life if we respond correctly?

How does this perspective change how we view the storms of life?

Application

1. Summarize what is God’s part and what is our part in accomplishing the mission?

Are you being faithful to your part?

2. Can you identify one struggle in your life now that God may want to use to display the life-changing difference Jesus makes in you to others?
3. In what way does this text in Acts encourage and strengthen us?