

The Unstoppable God

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning again. It's great to be here with you this morning. I want to start out this morning telling you a story about a man. His name is Desmond Doss. Some of you may have heard of him. There was a movie made about his life last year called Hacksaw Ridge. He joined the U.S. Army in 1942, and due to his faith, he believed that it was wrong to carry a gun, to threaten a life, or to take another person's life. And he made sure that the army knew about this when he joined, and he figured, because he believed so strongly that it was wrong to kill someone, that the army would make him a medic on the field. However, when he joined the army, instead of making him a medic, they put him in an infantry rifle company.

And here you have a man who refuses to pick up and carry a gun in a rifle company. And his team of soldiers that he was grouped with, understandably, saw him as a liability.

How can you be a part of a rifle troop when you don't carry a rifle? And so these men, because they saw him as a liability, they did everything that they could to get him taken out of their squad. They would threaten him, and they told him, if you go out to battle, I'll make sure you don't come back. They would insult him. They tried to say that he was mentally unfit for duty. They even tried to have him court-martialed for disobeying the direct order to pick up and shoot a gun. And nothing that they did worked. He kept sticking around. And eventually, as time went by, he actually started to turn the soldiers in his squadron to liking him. Because when they would go on these long marches, they would get blisters on their feet. And he would come and he would treat their blisters and they would get better. And when they were on these long marches, it was hot and it was dry. And soldiers would pass out from dehydration.

And he would be the first one at their side every time, offering them water from his own water bottle to help them recover and be able to get back up and keep going. Finally, his squadron gets sent into battle. And when they're on the battlefield, he has his focus on one thing and one thing only. And that is saving lives. On the field, it doesn't matter how dangerous it is, how many bullets are flying. When someone calls for a medic, he is there. The story that I read about him said that several times during the fighting, he was so close to enemy lines that he could hear the Japanese soldiers whispering in their trenches. And yet he went and he rescued as many people as he possibly could. Early in 1945, his company was trying to take this area that they referred to as Hacksaw Ridge. It was a big, very steep hill. And they fought and fought and finally made it to the top. And when they got to the top, they faced a counterattack from the Japanese soldiers who just started moving down the American troops. The American soldiers were commanded to retreat. And only a third of them were actually able to retreat because so many of them had been injured in this counterattack. And when the command to retreat came, everyone that was able to retreated except for this man, Desmond Doss. He stayed in the thick of the battle trying to rescue as many lives as he could. He put together a stretcher at the edge of the cliff and tied some rope to it. And one by one, he picked up the other soldiers and he carried them over to the stretcher. He would load them onto the stretcher, lower them over the edge to safety, pull the stretcher back up, go get another man, and carry him over to rescue him as well. And he said, I'm going to keep going until I pass out or get shot and die. As long as I am physically able to keep rescuing my fellow soldiers, I am going to keep saving lives. And on that day, he rescued 75 men from death. Later that year, he received the Congressional Medal of Honor. And the president, who was Harry Truman at the time, stood there and he shook his hand. He shook his hand and then throughout the award, he just held his hand.

And the president looked at Desmond Doss and he said, I'm proud of you. You really deserve this. I consider this a greater honor than being president. Desmond Doss was a man who lived his life with a single focus, a laser focus on saving lives on the battlefield. I don't know about you, but when I hear a story like the story of Desmond Doss, it does a couple things inside of me. One, it fills me with respect for someone who could live so selflessly and sacrificially. I'm impressed by people who live with such singular focus. For him, it was saving lives. Didn't matter what stood in his way. Could be threats, could be insults, could be bullets. He was determined as long as he was able to, he was going to keep moving and keep saving lives. The only thing that was going to stop him was death or incapacitation. The other thing that stories like this do is they make me want to do something great with my life. And we've been going the past few couple months through the book of Acts.

[5 : 49] And today we're continuing looking at the book of Acts. And we're going to see that God wants to shape us into this type of person. God wants us to be a church filled with Desmond Doss type people who live with a singular laser focus on him. And so what we're going to see today as we continue our study in Acts is that our unstoppable God accomplishes his unstoppable work by transforming the hearts of normal people like you and me to make us unstoppable forces for his kingdom. Before we start, let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you have spoken to us and that you have in your word given us the chance to know you. Such an amazing privilege and honor. And I pray that as we look at your word today that you would speak to us, that the Holy Spirit would make it clear to us what you want us to do in response. That you would help us to love you more, to love each other more, and to respond in obedience to what you're calling us to do. In Jesus' name, amen.

So like I said, we've been going through the book of Acts lately. And we've started out saying that God told his disciples that they would spread his word. They would start in Jerusalem, which we said for us is kind of like Pak Fulam. And then they would move on to Judea, which is the wider area, sort of like our Hong Kong island. And then to Samaria, which for us maybe would include new territories, Kowloon. And then to the ends of the earth, which is the ends of the earth.

In the past several weeks, we've been seeing this pattern where the church experiences God's blessing and then faces opposition. And then they experience God's blessing and then they face opposition.

And last week we looked at opposition from inside from this couple called Ananias and Sapphira. And if you want to know more about them, Bernard's sermon is on our website and you can listen to it.

[7 : 50] And today they again face blessing and then opposition. But like we said, through them, our unstoppable God accomplishes his unstoppable work by transforming the hearts of normal people like you and me and the apostles to make us unstoppable forces for his kingdom. So we're going to look at three things today. First, the insecurity of the powerful. Second, the courage of the weak. And then third, the source of unstoppable power. So first up, we have the insecurity of the powerful. So after last week's sermon, Ananias and Sapphira cause a problem for the church that's dealt with. And then we pick up today's passage and amazing things are happening with the church.

People are looking at these church leaders with respect and awe and people are becoming Christians. People are getting healed. And we see this first step of progression of the gospel message going outside Jerusalem and into Judea, the wider area. It says that people are bringing their friends, their family members, whoever, whoever's sick, whoever's demon-possessed from these surrounding towns into Jerusalem so that they can be healed by the apostles. Because this is crazy to me, but it says that so much healing is happening that even if Peter walks past you and his shadow falls on you at this time, you will be healed. Is that nuts to anyone else? It's crazy power at work from God. Things are going great, but not everyone is happy about this. The high priest, the main religious leader in Jerusalem of that day, steps up and arrests the apostles. All of them, alongside of his political party and religious party, the Sadducees, they see the apostles as a threat and so they release them. Now who are the

Sadducees and why did they see the apostles as a threat? The Sadducees were a leading religious group in this day. And in Israel at this time, religion and politics go hand in hand. So a leading religious group is also the leading political group. They had opponents. There was one group called the Pharisees that was probably their main opponent. And like opposing political parties in today's world, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, they would go at each other and attack each other for their different beliefs. But at the end of the day, both of them were fairly pro-establishment. They wanted things to stay the way that they were because they were comfortable with the system the way that it was.

And for them, as they looked out on the political and religious landscape of Israel, this new group of Christians was this new upstart group that they saw as a threat. And they felt the need to shut these guys down. So the Christians are a threat because people who have been good Jews their entire lives are all of a sudden now turning away from following the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

And the thing about the Sadducees is they had great worldly power. But the way that they respond to the apostles in this story shows that in reality, despite their worldly power, they were radically insecure people. How are they insecure? Well, look at verse 17 with me.

[11 : 24] It says, The high priest rose up, and all who were with him, that is the party of the Sadducees, and filled with jealousy, they arrested the apostles, and they put them in the public prison. The Sadducees, the great establishment political and religious leaders of their day, are jealous. And who are they jealous of? A group of street preachers. That's basically what the apostles are at this time. The establishment religious and political leaders of their day are jealous of this group of street preachers because they see them as a threat. And why were they jealous? Because the Sadducees weren't just leaders. They were people who found the core of their identity in being the leaders. They had built the foundation of their identity around this idea that I am a leader. We call that making an idol out of leadership. An idol is anything in our lives that we put as ultimate other than God. And the Sadducees, these religious leaders, had made being political and religious leaders into an idol. Which means that when this new group of Christians comes along and seems to be threatening their position of power, they're not just threatening a position of power, they're threatening the very core of the identity of these Sadducees.

It's not just that they're standing and this position is in threat, but that who I am as a person is in danger because of that. And that's how idols work. When our idols are threatened, we feel like not just the idol itself is threatened, but we ourselves are threatened. It works the same way in our lives today. Whenever we take anything other than God and make it ultimate in our lives.

Here's an example of what this looks like in my life. I like to be right. Justine can tell you that I like to be right. She's nodding her head now. Yes. I feel like if I know things and I am right about things, then I can be in control of situations, maybe in control of people. And so when I'm having a conversation and I say something and I think I'm right and someone else tells me I'm wrong, that threatens my idol of being right and being in control. And so when someone says I'm wrong about something, even if I am wrong, even if we can pull out Google and Google says, Eric, you're wrong, when they say you're wrong, I don't hear you're wrong.

What I hear is you're a worthless human being because you're wrong. And that means that you cannot have a normal, rational discussion in this situation because I am not focused on the facts anymore. I'm focused on trying to establish my worth as a person. And in this moment, because I feel like my worth as a person is threatened, I often lash out by trying to tear down the worth of the other person. So what started as a simple comment, Eric, you're wrong, can result in personal attacks and assaults on people from me because I feel like they have threatened me and so I need to threaten them in response. That's how idols work. They cause us to respond with jealousy, fear, anger, anxiety, anything except love. And that's exactly what we see happening in this story. The Sadducees see their idol threatened. They feel like they themselves and the core of their identity is threatened and they respond in jealousy. And not just jealousy, but also fear. So the Sadducees, they arrest the apostles, they put the apostles in prison. In the middle of the night, an angel comes and frees the apostles and says, go preach again in the temple. So they do that. And then in the morning, the Sadducees wake up and realize, oh no, these guys have escaped from prison. Where are they? Someone tells them where they are and they go and it says in verse 26 that they go and bring the apostles back again. They arrest them again. But notice this, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. They were not just jealous, they were also afraid. Why were they afraid? Because public opinion was turning against them and they thought that they would be killed by the people for doing what they were doing.

Because they built their identity around idols that were not big enough or strong enough or powerful enough to sustain the core of who they were. They acted in fear. Even though they thought that they were doing the right thing, they did it timidly in fear. Which is going to give a stark contrast later on when we look at the apostles and how they act in this situation, despite the fact that they had far less worldly power to rely on. And like I said, the way that idols work is the same way today. When we build our lives and our identities around idols, it leads to jealousy, it leads to fear, it leads to anxiety, stress, anger, anything except love. So if we want to be Desmond Doss type people who live with this singular focus on what God wants us to be focused on, step one is identifying and dealing with the idols in our lives. And if you're sitting here and you're like, I recognize some of these tendencies that you're describing in myself, but I don't necessarily know what my idols are that I struggle with, I have some questions I want us to look at that will help us think through what our idols are.

[17 : 10] So the first question, what is the first thing I want people to know about me when they meet me? What's the big thing that if they know nothing else about me, this is the one thing that they need to know?

Second, what do I daydream about? In those moments where there's nothing particular filling my mind, what is it that just naturally comes in there and consumes my thoughts? Third, what causes me the greatest amount of stress and anxiety?

What causes me to lose sleep at night? Finally, what wish or desire, if I didn't get it, would make me consider walking away from my faith?

Because we look through these questions, if we identify common themes among them, that's probably a sign that we have idols in our lives. There's a famous preacher back in the 1500s, he said, our hearts are idol factories.

They just find things and they idolize them. We place our hope in them. And the way that the Sadducees respond in this story shows us that building our lives around these idols is not sustainable because it leads to jealousy, it leads to fear, anxiety, anger.

[18 : 44] And no matter how much worldly power we may have, if our lives are built around idols, we will be wildly insecure people. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Let's look next at the courage of the weak. So in contrast to the Sadducees are the apostles. These guys are common, uneducated men.

Basically at this point, street preachers. They're finding places out in public areas, standing up and talking to people about Jesus. They don't have huge church buildings like we might picture them having today.

They're literally just finding wherever and using the opportunity to tell people about Jesus. By worldly standards, they really have nothing going for them. But God is doing these incredible and amazing, powerful things through them.

And from their actions, we can see amazing courage. I mean, look at what they were doing in this story. In Acts chapter 4, we saw that Peter and James got—no, Peter and John, sorry—got arrested.

[19 : 48] And they were threatened by the religious leaders saying, don't preach about Jesus anymore. And yet, at the start of today's passage, what are they doing? They're preaching about Jesus and healing people.

And loads of people are becoming Christians. So they get arrested. And they're put in prison. And in the middle of the night, the angel comes and says, go preach.

And what do they do? They go back to the exact same place where they were arrested the day before and start doing the exact same thing that got them arrested in the first place.

And then, they get arrested again. And when they come in, and they're standing before the religious leaders, they don't plead and say, we're sorry, please let us go, we won't do it anymore.

Look at this response that Peter gives to the high priest, the top religious leader of his day in Israel. He says, in verse 30, he says, literally, you killed Jesus.

[20 : 53] He stands in front of the top religious leaders of his day and accuses them of murder. And not just of murder, but he says, you killed Jesus by hanging him on a tree, and God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior.

He says, you murdered Jesus, and God is standing in direct opposition to you. That's harsh, especially being spoken towards a religious leader.

Not only that, but then he says, in verse 32, we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him. Now, follow this logic.

The Holy Spirit is a witness to the truth about these things of Jesus. God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey him. Therefore, if you obey God, you have the Holy Spirit, and you believe these things about Jesus.

However, you religious leaders do not believe these things about Jesus, which means you do not have the Holy Spirit, which means you are disobedient to God. Peter and the apostles stand before these men who have the power to have them killed and accuse them of murder, accuse them of going directly opposed to God in their actions and disobedience to God as a general pattern of life.

[22 : 14] And if you hear this response and you think, oh, that's probably just how people talked back then. It's not. And how do I know that? Because look at the response of the religious leaders in verse 33.

They heard this. They were enraged and wanted to kill them. They're no longer wanting a happy, peaceful, friendly conversation. They want blood.

They are angry. And the apostles are standing there incredibly courageous. Despite their lack of worldly power and lack of worldly authority, they have this power and this courage that the religious leaders of their day could only ever dream of.

The Sadducees respond in jealousy and fear when they feel that their position is in danger. And yet the apostles respond with amazing courage when even their lives are on the line.

And it's not that they don't recognize this. They know that their lives are in danger. They know that this is a dangerous situation. But God fills them with this incredible courage.

[23 : 21] And this contrast between the Sadducees and the religious leaders versus the apostles shows us that worldly power is not where security comes from.

Being the boss, being the CEO, does not make you a secure person. Having the top position in politics does not mean that you are courageous. It has to come from somewhere else.

It takes something else for us to live with the type of courage, the type of single-minded focus that the apostles had, that Desmond Doss had.

Where does that come from? Well, let's look at the source of unstoppable power. As the religious leaders have the apostles on trial, they all want to kill the apostles, and one of the religious leaders, a man named Gamaliel, stands up and says something actually very wise and insightful.

He says, Hey guys, let's think about this. If this new Christian movement is from men, if their power is from men, it's not going to last.

[24 : 37] We've seen plenty of different leaders throughout the years rise up, start these movements, and as soon as a leader gets killed, the movement just falls apart. If this is from men, it's just going to be like all the other ones.

Once a couple of key people get killed off, it's going to stop. No big deal. We don't need to do anything actively to oppose them because it's going to die out on its own. However, if this movement is from God, it doesn't matter what we do to oppose them, it's not going to work.

And if we try to make it stop, and it is from God, then what we're doing is we're actually opposing God, which is probably not a good idea. So we should stand back, we should let these guys go, we shouldn't cause any trouble for them, that's all.

And the other religious leaders listen to him, they decide to just beat the apostles instead of killing them, and then they let them go. But notice what happens with Gamaliel here.

He has really good insights. He speaks truth to a certain degree, and yet he still has the wrong response to what God is doing.

[25 : 57] Because as he speaks these words, look where he's standing. He's not standing saying, hey guys, God is working here, let's join him in what he's doing and be a part of it.

He's standing there as one of the religious leaders, still in opposition to what God is doing, saying, uh, maybe we shouldn't fight against this, I don't know.

If you think about the story of Desmond Doss, Gamaliel's response is the equivalent of sitting at home on your couch. Yeah, I guess it's better than joining the wrong side in the war and fighting against the good guys.

But at the end of the day, it's an active choice not to fight for what is right. Gamaliel, who's one of the top religious leaders in Israel, looks at the situation of this growing movement of Christianity, he says, I think God might be at work here, and then he stops, and he doesn't say, but I want to be a part of it.

So what does Gamaliel teach us? It teaches us that recognizing that there is a God and recognizing that that God is at work is not enough. It's not enough to give us this unstoppable power like the apostles and Desmond Doss have.

[27 : 11] For our lives to be transformed in such a way that we can live with this singular laser focus and unstoppable power, it takes something more.

What is that something more? Well, let's look at how the apostles respond here. They get beaten, which back in those days, getting beaten was not just like, you're done.

They would hit you with these specially designed whips, and they limited by law the number of times that they could whip you because if they whipped you too many times, you would die. And even within the legal limits, people would sometimes die from the impact that your body took while being beaten.

So these apostles are whipped to within an inch of their lives. And look at their response as they leave in verse 41. They left the presence of the council, rejoicing.

Rejoicing about what? Rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. There's something weird about these guys.

[28 : 23] Something different about them. Rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.

has anyone here ever like been wildly mistreated and then walked away from it saying, yay! That's not a normal human response.

Something has happened to these guys that has changed them. There is a power at work in their lives that is not a normal human response.

They are now part of this upside down inside out kingdom that finds honor in shame and rejoices in suffering.

And how is this response possible? It's only possible if the gospel grips the depths of your heart and is allowed to shape and mold the person that you are becoming.

[29 : 24] See, until we look at who God is and understand how big and amazing and powerful he is and understand the fact that we have chosen to rebel against him and cut ourselves off from any access to him, from any type of relationship with him, we're not going to understand how big of a deal a relationship with him really is.

but once we see that and once we see what he has done to make a relationship with him possible for us, that cannot help but change us.

When we look and we see the God who spoke the universe into existence by speaking and we recognize that he became a human being like you and me so he could have a relationship with us, that changes us.

When we recognize that Jesus, this God man, didn't just come to the earth as a human and live as a king but came to suffer and die because that was the price that it cost for us to be restored to a relationship with God and that he was willing to do that because he loved us, that changes us.

Hebrews chapter 12 says that Jesus endured the shame of the cross for joy because he loves us and he wanted to honor his father and he knew that us having a relationship with God would be something that would result in joy.

[31 : 07] So even as he was going to the cross, he was suffering, there was anguish, it was his darkest moment and yet he was still motivated by joy. and when we recognize that this God who became a man so that he could suffer for us so that we could be restored to a relationship with him that we in no way shape or form deserve was also raised from the dead and that his resurrection assures us that there is nothing, not even death, that can separate us from this relationship with him, that changes us.

and when he sends his Holy Spirit to live in our lives and guide us as a part of our day-to-day life, shaping us and making us more like him, that changes us into these type of singular-focused, laser-focused, inside-out, upside-down people who God will use as unstoppable forces in the world for him.

When we understand the power and the amazingness of these truths, we can become the type of people who stand up for God even when it costs us.

We can become the type of people who rejoice even when we're mistreated. We can become the type of people who consider it a joy to be mistreated for God.

And when we believe the gospel on this level, God makes us into unstoppable forces for his kingdom that our unstoppable God uses to spread his unstoppable kingdom in the world.

[32 : 55] You know, I think looking back at the story of Desmond Doss, it's easy to listen to that story and think, oh, that was great for him and I'm really glad that there's not a war going on right now that I would have to do that in.

Anyone else feel that way? You know, the Bible says that life is a war. There's a pastor and preacher named Paul Tripp, and he says it this way.

He says, there's a war for our hearts that takes place in every situation, every location, and every relationship of daily life. This war is fought on the turf of our hearts and is fought for control of our souls.

every decision, every action, and every word in our lives reflects this war. It is the great conflict of human life.

This war is the reason for all the other wars fought between people. You know, here in Hong Kong, it can be so easy to be consumed by comfort and not want to think about the fact that we are living in a war on our day-to-day life.

[34 : 03] every moment that we choose to spend focusing on our comfort or our advancement or our idols is a moment that we're losing ground in this fight on the side of our unstoppable God.

And God wants us to approach this battle in life with a singular focus on him. Just like Desmond Doss, each of our lives we live surrounded by people who need, to be rescued.

Now that doesn't mean throwing them over our shoulders and walking them to the edge of a cliff, but it means pointing them to the source of life, the God who loves them and who wants to save and rescue people.

And for us to be effective in the role that God has called us to, we need to live our lives with a singular focus. That doesn't come from just recognizing there's a God or recognizing that he's at work, but from trusting in him and joining him in the work that he's doing.

And as long as our lives are built around things other than God, we're going to be ineffective. But when we build our lives around God and shape them around the gospel, it will become fuel that changes us into these unstoppable forces for God's kingdom.

[35 : 24] And at the end of the battle, it's not going to be President Truman or Trump, standing there congratulating us, but it's going to be God looking at us and saying, well done, good and faithful servant.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you are a good God. We thank you that you are a God who rescues, that you are a God who empowers us to be these unstoppable forces for you.

As I think about this idea of being unstoppable forces for God, I'm reminded of a verse in Hebrews chapter 11 where it talks about Abel. And it says that even though he is dead, he still speaks.

Not even death could stop him from showing the world how great and amazing our God is. And God, I pray that you would shape us into those types of people today.

People who are unstoppable, not even death, can stop us from showing the world how great you are because you are worth it.

[36 : 34] I pray that you would show us what the idols are that we're relying on in our lives and that you would help us to fight against those continuously even when it's hard. That you would give us joy in knowing you and trusting you.

And that you would spread your kingdom here on earth. through us. God, we love you. We thank you that you love us.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Thank you.