**Uniquely Jesus: The Story Continues** July 1, 18

An Unstoppable God

Hold up an onion. When we began to study Acts 5, I told you that the story in this chapter, like an onion, had many layers to it.

We’ve already considered:

* The harassment by the religious leaders of the apostles. The Sadducees did so, because they were jealous of the following the apostles were gaining.
* The surprising way in which God rescued the apostles. God will lead his people into dangerous places for the sake of saving lost people, but as he does so, he is never careless or thoughtless in how he utilizes our lives.
* The expressed commitment of the apostles – *“we must obey God in all things.”* Their loyalty was not driven by duty, but by love.

The next layer in Acts 5 that we want to focus on this morning is the surprising advice given by Gamaliel as to how the Sanhedrin should respond to the apostles’ blatant refusal to obey them: ***“Leave these men alone! Let them go!***

*Sun Tzu…was a brilliant Chinese military strategist and general of the Chinese army… during the 4th century BC. [He was] the author of*The Art of War,*a book of military strategy, [so insightful and brilliant that it has influenced] … warfare throughout history. [One of Sun Tzu’s strategic principles was] …****“Do not fight battles you cannot win!”*** https://www.donbrobst.com/2012/05/choosing-your-battles-wisely/

**Coffee/Question: Is Sun Tzu’s advice, good advice? Why? Why not?**

Feedback

Today’s big idea comes from both the reason why Gamaliel gave the advice – leave these men alone, and Sun Tzu’s strategic principle of – do not fight battles you cannot win.

Let’s work our way through today’s passage.

**Verse 28**.

From the moment, the apostles appeared before the Sanhedrin, the air in that room crackled with hostility.

Peter and the apostles answered the high priest; explaining why they hadn’t done as the Sanhedrin had instructed.

**Verse 29-32**.

Their answer, rather than placating the Sanhedrin, actually helped to push them from a posture of hostility to one of rage.

**Verse 33.**

The day before, God the Father had rescued the apostles from prison, using one of his holy angels to do so.

On this particular day, God the Father rescued the apostle’s from death through Gamaliel.

Who was Gamaliel? **Verse 34.**

gotquestions.org provides additional information:

In that era

*[Gamaliel is best] known for his most famous pupil—another Pharisee named*

[*Saul of Tarsus*](https://www.gotquestions.org/Saul-of-Tarsus.html)*(*[*Acts 22:3*](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%2022.3)*), who later became the apostle Paul.*

*It was under the tutelage of Rabbi Gamaliel that Paul developed an expert knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures.*

*Paul’s educational and professional credentials allowed him to preach in the synagogues wherever he traveled (see*[*Acts 17:2*](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%2017.2)*), and his grasp of Old Testament history and law aided his presentation of Jesus Christ as the One who had fulfilled the Law (*[*Matthew 5:17*](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%205.17)*).  
  
Gamaliel is mentioned…in the*[*Talmud*](https://www.gotquestions.org/Talmud.html)*… which is the Mishnah (written oral Torah which was taught to Moses by God) and the Gemara (commentaries elaborating on the Mishnah)… and also by the*[*historian Josephus*](https://www.gotquestions.org/Flavius-Josephus.html)*…*

*[Though] our knowledge of Gamaliel is limited…it is clear that Gamaliel and his family were revered as men of wisdom and [good] judgment.*

*In God’s sovereign plan, this Jewish rabbi preserved the lives of the apostles in the early church and helped to equip the greatest Christian missionary.*

https://www.gotquestions.org/Gamaliel-in-the-Bible.html

These details about Gamaliel are important for us to know. They explain why, when he stood to his feet, silence, like a wave crashed over the hall.

Up until that point, it had been the high priest who had been in charge of the questioning.

But now, all eyes looked to Gamaliel.

When he said, *“Take these men out of here,”* the temple guards obeyed him.

There was an authority about Gamaliel that commanded, not only respect, but obedience.

**Verse 35.**

Gamaliel had thought much upon the person of Jesus and the following he had.

Gamaliel had put things together that the rest of the Sanhedrin didn’t see or had refused to see.

**Verse 36-37.**

While the names of Theudas and Judas are unknown to us, they were well known to everyone who lived in Israel at that time.

**Theudas** had claimed to be a prophet of God.

He alleged to have had the ability to divide the Jordan River.

Because of his charismatic personality a great number of people followed him.

But when he and four hundred men challenged the might of the Roman empire and its armies, they were defeated.

When the Romans captured Theudas, they cut off his head and put it on display in Jerusalem.

Gamaliel’s point for mentioning Theudas is stated at the end of v.36: ***“[When he] was killed, ALL his followers were dispersed and It ALL came to nothing.”***

From Gamaliel’s perspective this was a vitally important detail.

**Judas the Galilean** rose to prominence in the days of the census.

The census being referred to, was the one ordered by Caesar Augustus.

This was the census that had forced Joseph and Mary to journey to Bethlehem in the final days of her pregnancy.

Judas was the leader of an intensely patriotic Jewish group known as **the zealots**. They saw themselves as freedom fighters.

Judas said death was to be preferred to subjection to Rome.

When Judas stirred up chaos against the Romans, they granted him his preference… and killed him.

Gamaliel’s point in mentioning Judas is stated at the end of v.37: ***“[When he] … was killed… ALL his followers were scattered.”***

Here again, from Gamaliel’s perspective this was a vitally important detail.

No one would have disputed Theudas and Judas’ patriotism.... or questioned their skill in inspiring people to follow them.... or suggested they were not brave in challenging Rome, the superpower of their day.

But what these two men had hinted at and suggested...was that they were God’s Messiah, who would rescue Israel from the bondage of Rome, and would set up God’s kingdom on earth.

As the saying goes - the proof is in the pudding.

The claims of these two men were proven to be empty – because... they were dead, and their movement was no more.

The prophet Zechariah had said (13:7), “*Strike the shepherd, scatter the sheep.”* This is exactly what had happened in the case of Theudas and Judas and their followers.

According to Gamaliel, if Jesus was another “messianic wannabe,” then what had happened to Theudas and Judas’ followers should very soon happen to the followers of Jesus, because… Jesus had been killed.

Gamaliel in his argument, voiced today’s big idea.

**Verse 38a**:

Gamaliel’s counsel to leave these men alone was not based on **fear of the apostles**, or **fear of the Romans**, but upon a holy **fear of God**.

What he had seen and heard led him to believe that maybe God was at work in the person of Jesus and his followers.

The passage doesn’t say that Gamaliel became a believer that day.

But in his own words, Gamaliel had seen enough to persuade him to stand to his feet and to speak – urging caution in the treatment of the apostles.

**Verse 38b-39**.

In these verses we find our big idea: **nothing and no one can stop God.**

**Verse 40a.**

The story was not over.

There is more we will consider next week.

Gamaliel’s defense did save the apostle’s lives.

But it didn’t save them being flogged.

The apostles did suffer on Jesus’ behalf.

Look at **verse 41.**

This is what we want to unpack next week – why did they rejoice?

Why did they consider suffering to be a privilege?

As we finish, there are several points of connection we need to consider.

Remember who Gamaliel is speaking to – religious people.

Remember - religious people need a Savior as much as do atheists and agnostics.

Every human being enters life as an enemy of God.

But in the mercy of God, our status can change.

We who follow Jesus are the living proof that God loves to make family of former enemies.

Never forget the power of the gospel.

You and I who follow Jesus have the advantage of hindsight.

We know what God the Father; the Son and the Spirit were doing in Jerusalem 2000 years ago and what they have been doing since.

Jesus said in Matthew 16:18:

*“****I will build my church*** *and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”*

Jesus’ church is not a building, not an organization, but a community; a movement of people alive to him and in step with his Spirit.

And here’s where we are meant to find great encouragement.

Jesus is unstoppable.

He is unstoppable… in his pursuit of men and women who are lost to him; unstoppable in making family of former enemies.

When it comes to his church, Jesus has no plan B.

I’ve mentioned this before.

In a vision, John the apostle was allowed to see ahead to the day of the new heavens and the new earth.

What John saw is that Jesus had succeeded in his purpose and in his activity to build his church; a community from every nation, every tribe, every people and language – a great multitude that no one could count. Revelation 7:9.

Jesus will receive the reward of his suffering, and it will be men and women who’ve been ransomed from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God.

As Jesus’ followers we are not unstoppable.

But we are asked:

to stand our ground.

to stand in the gap.

There will be conflict.

There will be pressure to compromise and cut corners.

But Jesus would have us stand our ground, to be faithful to him.

There is moral and spiritual drift happening all around us.

But the unstoppable Savior asks us to stand in the gap for him.

To be a people distinct – in word and deed - because of our love for and commitment to him.

Jesus assured the church in Philadelphia, Revelation 3:7:

*What I open no one can shut, and what I shut no one can open.*

What Jesus told Paul when he arrived in Corinth, is true of what Jesus says to his people in whatever city or region they find themselves, Acts 18:9:

*Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you...I have many people in this city.*

Jesus says to us - don’t live in fear – stand your ground.

Jesus says to us - keep on speaking, I am with you – stand in the gap.

The One we live for; the One we stand with…is unstoppable.

Oh church, may God’s Spirit capture our imaginations to live, and to spend our lives, for the great cause of Jesus!!!

I also want to encourage you with a secondary connection that is not explicitly stated in this passage.

Have you ever been discouraged by the stuff that surfaces in your thoughts or that comes out of your mouth or how you react at times?

Do you ever feel like… your spiritual progress is one step forward, and two steps back?

I remind you - we are saved by grace.

What God began in each of us by the Spirit, will be completed.

He is unstoppable.

He will rescue you…he will transform you – body, soul and spirit.

Jesus is unstoppable.

So take heart.

Draw from him, fresh resolve and courage.

As he returned to his Father’s home, Jesus’ last words were: *“I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And this is my promise: I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

Jesus is unstoppable because he holds all authority in heaven and earth.

When it

What did Gamaliel fear? Better said, who did he fear?

He feared God.

What do we learn here?

What is it from this passage that connects to our lives?

and it is the question that every person is confronted with – is Jesus’ different than…you put in a name, Buddha, Krishna, Muhammed, Vishnu, Bahaullah, Laozi (Taoism)?

And if so, in what way?

There is an emphasis that is obvious, right alongside of one that is subtle.

**The obvious.**

All around the world, in every nation, in every city, in every region, in every business, in every school, in every family….there are purposes and activities that are being carried out that are of human origin.

Gamaliel was not evaluating human activity in general ways.

He was not suggesting that all human activity was flawed, like the writer of Ecclesiastes who began his book with this conclusion: *Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!* 1:2.

Gamaliel was speaking about spiritual movements.

This makes a huge difference to our understanding of the passage.

Gamaliel’s point was that it didn’t take long in the case of Theudas and Judas, before it became obvious, that in spite of their claims to the contrary, their movements were not of God.

The origin of their ideas was to be found in themselves.

They advocated their own agendas and in carrying out those agendas, they utilized human energy and means to achieve their goals.

Yoda would say: A movement of God they were not.

**The Subtle**

If God was on the move; if God was acting through the apostles, the Sanhedrin in opposing the apostles, would find themselves in a fight with God they could not win.

When God is on the move, here me as I say this as graciously as I can…when God is on the move, only a fool would try to fight him in order to frustrate him or stop him.

Theudas and Judas might have looked like prophets when first seen and heard; they might have gathered people around them; they might have inspired hope

What Gamaliel subtly stated,

Gamaliel believed that a fight against God was a fight that could not be won.

God is unstoppable.

He is unstoppable because he is powerful.

If God were a tyrant, then we would have every reason to be afraid of his power.

But he is not.

If God was unstable, volatile, then we would have every reason to be afraid of his power.

But he is not.

There have been those who’ve tried to fight God, and they now lie in history’s rubble

Being the intelligent man he was,

I am certain Gamaliel would have been well aware

of Jesus and his claims

and the things that had happened in Jerusalem

since his death and supposed resurrection.

“If their purpose or activity

is of human origin, it will fail.”

Gamaliel was not making

a general reference to human achievement.

He was not saying that everything humans do is a failure.

What then was his point?

Theudas and Judas both said the things they did

was because God had specifically told them

to do such and such.

You know the saying, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating?”

The point of the saying is that the true value or quality of something

is evidenced by the results it produces.

The fact that the movements associated with Theudas and Judas

came to nothing is proof

that their claims to divine inspiration were false.

No one disputed their patriotism

or their skill in inspiring people to follow them

or their bravery in challenging the super power of their day.

But the purpose for which they had lived;

the activities they had engaged in;

had its origin in themselves; not God.

And we know this because…everything they had attempted to do

came to nothing when they were killed.

The implication of what Gamaliel was saying to the Sanhedrin

was that if Jesus was a fraud

the same thing that had happened to the followers of Theudas and Judas

should happen to these followers of Jesus.

And if it didn’t?

Then they were trying to stamp out something

that could not be stamped out.

Read **verse 38-39** again.

Did Gamaliel say those believers were unstoppable?

What he said was that if their purpose and activity was of God,

nothing the Sanhedrin could do – even putting the apostles to death –

could stop this movement.

Jesus in Matthew 16:18 said, *“I will build my church*

*and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”*

Jesus had not said to his followers. “You will build my church.”

He said, *“I will build my church.”*

His last words to them were,

*“I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And this is my promise: I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28*

What Jesus did after his resurrection was unstoppable

because he held all power and authority in heaven and on earth.

As he directed his followers to go into every nation of the world,

his promise to them was that he would be right beside them,

working through them as he built his church.

But he was not talking about constructing an edifice

or establishing an institution.

When Jesus spoke of building his church,

what he would build was a movement of people,

who believed he was the Messiah, the Son of the living God;

a people, who in committing their lives to him,

would pledge to live in obedience to everything he said.

It is this movement initiated by Jesus, directed by Jesus,

empowered by Jesus… that is unstoppable.

Gamaliel said to the Sanhedrin,

if these men are truly part of a movement of God,

you will not be able to crush it even if you kill them.

What in fact you will end up doing is fighting against God

and that is a fight you cannot win.

What does this mean to you and I today?

We choose what we spend our life on.

The writer of Ecclesiastes said, *“When I surveyed*

*all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless…nothing was gained.”* 2:11

Both the writer of Ecclesiastes and Gamaliel understood

that God has given human beings

the ability to do remarkable things.

But if a person makes themselves the focus of all that they do,

when they leave this life,

they will have nothing of enduring value to show

for the years they have lived.

The invitation to follow Jesus

is an invitation to willingly receive him

as the Leader of your life and the Forgiver of your sin.

But it is also an invitation to invest your life

in what he says is important

and what it is he is currently doing here on earth.

The apostles had been gripped by the amazing person of Jesus.

He had transformed their lives.

He had made known to them God’s unbelievable salvation

and his intent through that salvation

to undo what sin had ruined in peoples lives

and in the creation.

They couldn’t believe that having forgiven them,

Jesus would give them the privilege

of spending their lives on helping him

to invite and gather into a community,

people from every nation

whose bond was their common commitment to Jesus.

That’s why no threat could convince them

to stop speaking of Jesus and living for him.

Sure they were afraid – but they held on to the promise of Jesus

that he would be right there with them

as they did what he asked them to do

and live as he had asked them to live.

If you have experienced God’s amazing grace in the person of Jesus,

his plan is to work through you in such a way

that others far from him will see and encounter him

as they observe the life you now live because of Jesus.

Through you Jesus wants to showcase his grace;

through you Jesus wants to draw people to himself

as you would both live and proclaim the good news about him.

It started in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

People who met Jesus through that initial group of 120,

were used by Jesus to help others meet him,

who were used by Jesus to help others meet him,

who were used by Jesus to help others meet him…

until here we are today.

There is a link that stretches back 2000 years to those first 120 believers.

Because those believers were faithful in making their lives available

for Jesus to work through,

many of you here today know Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

It is not the intent of Jesus that this long chain of connections

would end with you and I.

Through us he wants to reach others in our generation

who are still far from him.

This story reminds us that to be his follower

is not just to be given a ticket that gets us out of hell,

when we leave this life to live in eternity.

Hold up ticket

To follow Jesus is to enter into a life where everything

about who we are and what we do

is centered in Jesus.

The pull of our culture is so strong;

the appeal to live for our senses is so convincing

the advertising that bombards us is so relentless;

that we are easily prone to shift away from

living like Jesus would live if he were us,

and spending our lives on his purpose and activity.

If that has happened in you,

then I would urge you in light of what this passage is saying to us,

to make whatever confession, whatever adjustment is necessary,

so that the focus of your life is once again

the priority of Jesus to build a movement of people

who believe he is the Son of God

and who’ve committed all that they are to him.

If you’re on track in this matter,

if the passion of your life is Jesus and his great mission,

then I encourage you to affirm afresh your commitment to him.

If you don’t yet know Jesus, his invitation to you is to come to him.

If you’d like, we’d be more than happy to help introduce you to him.

We are not partnering with Jesus

to build an edifice or an institution.

These are not what he bled and died for.

It is people who matter to him.

And in all we do it is to help peopl

We have this building and we are grateful for what it allows us to do.

But this building is not the church.

We are the church, those who share a common commitment to Jesus,

the Messiah, the son of the living God.

As a church, when we partner together as ministry teams,

or when we open our homes for people to share a meal and to visit; when we participate in clubs or organization;

or help in some way in the community

we do so not just to put on an event or to participate in some activity,

but to create opportunities, environments

where people can meet Jesus.

Why do we do that?

Because Jesus if focused on encountering people

its not just about doing an event or an activity.

As a movement of people, the work of God in this town

is not limited to what happens in this building;

nor is it confined to what the various pastors in this town would do.

Jesus’ work of building his church

by gathering people into relationship with himself,

happens through all of us

in our neighborhoods, schools, places of employment,

and in the multitude of personal connections and interactions

we have with the people of this community.

In inviting him to forgive our sins and come into our lives,

The first three chapters of the book of Revelation

record the words of letters that were written

to seven different churches in modern day Turkey.

Those seven churches no longer are in existence.

This story in Acts 5 reminds us that in building his church,

Jesus is not focused on the construction of edifices or institutions.

This story then challenges us to examine whether our lives are yielded for Jesus to use; whether

As such it is a movement that depends on our lives being available for Jesus

our connections with

But in partnering with Jesus in what he is doing here in Revelstoke,

this story reminds us that he will be focused on people

, we can’t see it and we have no idea of how it wen

He uses us to build a movement of people

that makes a difference in this life and in the life to come.

about Jesus and his followers

was that if the claim to be the Son of God

was made up by Jesus or someone else associated with him;

if the things done by Jesus were but the results

of his personal charisma or knowing how to work a crowd,

if what was happening in Jerusalem among his followers

was nothing more than the leftover zeal of devoted individuals

who refused to concede their leader was dead,

then very soon it would be exposed for that

and would collapse in on itself.

And Gamaliel could say that because…that’s what had happened

to all the other so-called spiritual movements

whose inspiration and reason for existence

was rooted in human purpose or activity.

The curse upon humanity that frustrates us so much

is that we are transitory.

The things we attempt to do with our lives

are so easily undo by others when we die.

People once powerful in spirit and deed are no more.

Nations and empires once feared for their might are no more.

James spoke the truth when he wrote in his letter

that we are like a mist

that appears for a little while and then is gone.

We long to make our mark on our time and beyond.

I believe that’s why individuals so often claim

their ideas and actions are inspired by God.

They do so, hoping those claims will give

additional credibility and weight to the things they do.

But regardless of the claims made by any person,

you and I can know whether something is of God

or is of human origin:

does it endure or does it fails.

If something is of God it cannot be stopped.

That was Gamaliel’s observation from years of studying Scripture

and observing human culture and the activity of God in his day.

There is something here we need to connect to our lives

I remind you that it is God the Father who determines the circumstances and how long his followers live.

I’ve heard variations of this said at many funeral services – \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ was taken too soon.

I understand that this is the sentiment of a grieving heart.

But follower of Jesus, know and live in this truth - the Father has determined the length of your days – before you were born, he determined your beginning and he has determined your ending and all the days in between.

The reason it always feels like it is too soon when a person dies, is because God has placed eternity in the human heart.

Every person intuitively senses they are meant to live forever, even if they can’t explain why they sense that.

We will come back to this in our study in Acts, but hear what the Scripture says about King David – Acts 13:36 – *Now when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep…*

It is the Father who determines when you and I die – and he does so for the sake of his glory and for our good.

We live to serve his purpose in our generation.

And when we have done so, then and only then, does the Father call us home.