

THE BIG IDEA: The church is an unstoppable force.

The Take-Off

If you're here with us for the first time, we're currently working our way through the history of the early church that's found in Acts, and we've discovered something all of us already know: life is about ups and downs.

In fact, it can often feel like being in a car with someone trying to learn to drive a stick - lots of starts, stops, and jerks. In Acts 12, we'll meet one of those jerks and we'll see how his life became an illustration of today's Big Idea: **the church is an unstoppable force.**

Now, before we dive in, let's make sure we're on the same page about a few terms, okay?

- By "church" we mean the larger (worldwide) body of Christ, not just a local body.
- By "body" we mean the whole that is made up of the smaller parts, just like you have one body with many parts.
- And by "jerk" we mean anyone who tries to get in the way of the "church" or the "body"
- So when we read about a King who was a jerk, you may picture others instead: people who mock your faith, people who constantly criticize you as you try to walk with Jesus, co-workers or friends who try to tempt you away from your convictions.

The point today isn't to walk out more convinced that they are jerks as much as it is to walk out today more convinced that no matter how hard they may try, **the church is an unstoppable force** that they can't defeat.

And because that's true, there are 3 things we should do:

1. Pray again (v. 5)

A little background...

After a great run of some pretty incredible events for the young church, chapter 12 crosses her path with the jerk of all jerks - Herod.

Now, to be sure, Saul had been awful to the early church (we've already studied about his persecution of believers), but he at least acted out of conviction. Herod acted out of convenience. Basically, he's just a jerk.

If you spend much time in the New Testament, you'll notice a lot of Herods. This one is the grandson of Herod the Great, who reigned when Jesus was born.

And so, to gain political influence, Herod arrested some Christians, James being one of them.

James isn't just ANY follower of Jesus. He's one of the original twelve, and according to many passages, was in the "Inner Three" - which sounds like a group of superheroes but was really the 3 disciples who were the closest to Jesus.

Just to make sure you know I'm not making that up, here are a few passages to look up that show James' "Inner Three" status: Matthew 17:1; 26:37; Mark 5:37 and 9:2

The reason that's so important is because you would have to assume that if anyone was going to be either immune from hardships or delivered from hardships, it would be on of the Inner Three.

But instead, he got killed (v. 2)

Our first thought might be to raise the objection: "But I thought you said **the church is an unstoppable force!**"

It is, even when individuals members get stopped.

James got stopped, and it seemed that Peter would be, too, because Herod was thirsty for more approval from the people (v. 3)

But even in the worst of times - like the death of one of the Inner Three - the church kept moving forward

Eusebius (an early church historian) recorded that the soldier who was guarding James was so moved by his witness that he declared himself a Christian and was willingly beheaded next to James

And the church's response to the death of James and arrest of Peter?

They prayed. AGAIN. (v. 5)

They prayed for Peter to be delivered even after their prayers for James appeared to go unanswered.

They prayed earnestly - literally means "stretching out as far as you can for something" - to verb is related to the medical term describing the stretching of a muscle to its limits

It is the same word for the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane when he sweated drops of blood (Luke 22:44)

Too often in prayer we want God to care about things we really don't care that much about.

But the real takeaway we need to get here is that they prayed that passionately AFTER James was beheaded.

Would you and I still pray like that after such a loss? Or would we stop because of doubt, anger, grief?

When we understand that **the church is an unstoppable force**, we'll not only pray, but we'll pray again.

2. Look again (v. 16)

So they did. The early church, believing that what God was building couldn't be stopped, kept praying in spite of the odds that faced them and Peter, and God did something amazing.

At just the right time (the night before the trial that would certainly lead to his death), Peter was delivered

- He was at peace (sleeping)
 - He was under twice the guard (usu. just one guard, Peter had 2 bound to him)
 - 16 soldiers guarded the entrance
 - The angel had to wake him up (v. 7) and tell him to get dressed (v. 8)
 - Verse 10 says they came to the iron gate and it opened for them by itself - this is the Greek word "automatos"
- This doesn't just happen for Peter, but for you and me, too.

F.F. Bruce relates the story of Sundar Singh, a Tibetan Christian who was likewise freed miraculously from a prison. For preaching of the gospel, he was thrown into a well, and a cover set over it and securely locked. He would be left in the well until he died, and he could see the bones and rotting corpses of those who had already perished in there. On the third night of his imprisonment, he heard someone unlocking the cover of the well and removing it. A voice told him to take hold of the rope that was being lowered. Sundar was grateful that the rope had a loop he could put his foot in, because he had injured his arm in the fall down into the well. He was raised up, the cover was replaced and locked, but when he looked to thank his rescuer he could find no one. When morning came, he went back to the same place he was arrested and started preaching again. News of the preaching came to the official who had him arrested, and Sundar was brought before him again. When the official said someone must have gotten the key and released him, they searched for the key - and found it on the official's own belt. God is still writing the Book of Acts!

After Peter realized he had been set free, he went straight to the others who were still praying (v. 12)

The girl who went to the door recognized his voice and was so excited that she forgot to open it!

And in verse 15 we find that the church who prayed again even in a difficult time...didn't believe that God would actually answer their prayers!

Understand this: the amount of faith you and I have is never as important as the object of our faith. A lot of faith in thin ice will more than likely get you wet; a little faith in very thick ice will keep you dry.

Is it even better to have a lot of faith in the right object? Absolutely. But the object is infinitely more important, and the fact that God answered the prayers of followers who didn't even believe that he could shows us that little faith can accomplish great things if it is placed in a great God.

Thankfully, Peter kept knocking, and these doubting, unbelieving disciples looked again (v. 16) and saw the answer to their prayers.

Can we ask ourselves the honest question, "Have we stopped looking?" Have we allowed disappointment and fear to rob us of opening the door to hope?

What have you prayed so long for that you have begun to think the answer will never come?

John 10:10 says that our enemy comes to steal, and what he loves to steal is our belief that Jesus - as it says in the second part of verse 10 - WILL COME.

When we believe that **the church is an unstoppable force**, it changes the way we see our circumstances.

So don't stop looking.

Mark 14:38 - Watch and pray. Open the door many times, because the answer will come.

3. Consider again (v. 24)

After the miraculous answer to prayer, Herod flipped out

He had the guards questioned and then killed and then he took a leave of absence.

Eventually he allowed the people to call him a god without correcting them and so God killed him and the worms ate him

But the word of God - and the church of God - continued to increase and spread (v. 24)

The takeaway for each of us? When we understand that **the church is an unstoppable force**, it would be wise of us to consider again which side of that force we are on.

In Matthew 12:30, Jesus said that whoever isn't with him is against him. In the New Living Translation it reads

"anyone who isn't with me opposes me, and anyone who isn't working with me is actually working against me."

I don't want to be on the wrong side of that verse, do you?

Here are just a few - besides Herod in our chapter - who have:

- Friedrich Nietzsche, philosopher: claimed God was dead and Christianity was for the weak; spent his last few years insane
- Sinclair Lewis, Nobel Prize winning author: wrote novel Elmer Gentry about an evangelist who drank and slept with women. He died in a clinic near Rome as a hopeless alcoholic.
- Ernest Hemingway, author: lived recklessly and without consequence until he shot himself in the head with a shotgun

What does it mean? It means that we are moving downstream instead of upstream. (2 Chronicles 16:9)

It means that we have the greatest player ON OUR SIDE!!! (Romans 8:31)

The Landing

Here are some things we can take away from this passage:

If the church is an unstoppable force, it matters what side of that force we're on.

- Acts 5:39 - opposing the church means we're opposing God
- James 4:6 - pride leads to opposition, humility leads to grace

If the church is an unstoppable force, we have more allies than we do enemies.

- Luke 9:49-50 - God is not in competition with himself
- When area churches win, we win!

- We aren't in a race for more church members as much as we're in a fight for more family members.

If the church is an unstoppable force, we can have more confidence in prayer.

- Daniel 10:12 - Our God hears us the moment we pray and sends answers. It is no longer "if" but "when"
- 1 John 5:15 - the confidence that comes from knowing we've been heard by God