

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

Acts 9:1-18

Background on Stephen in Acts 7, where Saul first appears...

In this story, we are given the face of evil. The face of our enemy. In most stories today, whether they be books, movies, or shows on Netflix, evil abounds. But what makes the story interesting, what grabs and pulls someone in, is putting a face on the evil. Saying, "this guy right here, he's the one you need to watch out for." After watching superhero movies and series the past few years, you sometimes see them lurking in the shadows. Something bad happens to a "good" or "innocent" character, and as the story slowly unfolds, we see who is behind the scenes, pulling the strings. The one who pulled the trigger or did the deed isn't the one who put the plan in motion. There was someone further up the food chain. A mob boss, a villain directing his henchmen, a professional criminal who makes a living by guiding and directing others to do his bidding. As Luke writes the book of Acts, he tells us in Acts 7 of Stephen standing up and preaching the gospel. Telling the good news of Jesus Christ. Calling out the religious leaders for being hypocrites who killed Jesus and resisted God at every step throughout history. He is dragged out, and they begin to stone him. The camera pans over, and there stands Saul, watching the events unfold as people lay their coats at his feet as they stone Stephen to death. Acts 8:1 states, **"And Saul approved of their killing him."** I imagine an evil smile slowly spreading across his face as the camera zooms in and slowly fades to black. There is no doubt. He is the enemy. He is the one to fear. Luke has set the stage. Watch out for Saul.

The next scene opens up as verse 1 continues...**"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."** We hear how Saul goes from house to house, dragging off both men and women who follow Jesus, to be put in prison.

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

Pastor Randy shared a couple weeks ago what happens next, as Luke tells the stories of those who were scattered. Of Simon the sorcerer seeking God's power for his own position, and about Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

And then we come to Acts 9, where Luke picks back up and tells us the story of our villain.

"Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem."

Damascus was over 130 miles away from Jerusalem.
::Explain "The Way."::
Taking them all the way back to Jerusalem was a big deal!

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

YES!! Our villain has been struck down! He has been knocked down with a crushing blow, and the referee is starting to count to ten. This is what he gets for persecuting Christians. In fact, God said that he was persecuting God himself!!! What's

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

going to happen to you when you persecute God? Will he get the full, sweet justice that he deserves? He is blind and led into Damascus.

Into our story walks someone we haven't met yet, Ananias. He's not seen or known as a leader to our knowledge. We don't find anything else in the Bible about him.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

I can't blame him for saying that. Who could!? Saul is the enemy! He is the one leading the charge against those who call upon Jesus' name. He is the one hurting people and having them dragged out of their homes. Why in the world would I seek out someone with a track record of killing people just like me?!? That's ludicrous. That's insane. So Ananias just clearly states the facts to God.

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

When God says "Go!", it's good to go. You know how your parents would tell you to stop fighting in the backseat, and you'd keep doing it anyway? But then, they would pull over, stop the car, turn around, and in a very quiet, but very firm voice say, "I said stop." That's the feeling I would have had if I was Ananias. God told him to go and do something. Ananias doesn't say "no," but he simply points out some of the things that maybe God didn't realize. And the very next word out of God's mouth is "GO!"

It's funny, (and yet at the same time very sad), when we try to rationalize why we shouldn't do something God tells us to do. Like we see or know something He doesn't see or doesn't know. Who are we to question God Almighty?!?!?

So God tells Ananias to go, and also explains to him a little bit of the bigger picture. Telling Ananias that He is going to use Saul to reach not only the Jews, but the Gentiles as well.

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Why did God use Ananias? Couldn't He have just healed Saul himself? (The answer is yes.). I mean, Saul was already praying. His heart was already there. And yet He still used Ananias as His chosen instrument to reach Saul? Why can't God just do it Himself? The cool thing is, God lets us take part in His miracles. **We don't have to let God work through us, we get to let God work through us.** Ananias was a nobody. He wasn't an apostle. He wasn't a pastor. And yet he will forever be

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

remembered as the one who prayed for Saul. God could have done it all on His own, but He let Ananias share and take part in the story. God lets us share in, and be a part of, His story. He lets us share in, and be a part of, His glory! You wanna see God's glory? Start praying for opportunities to let it be seen through you.

And yet there are times, we act as if we are bothered by this. "God, can't you get someone else to do it?" We frequently pray for God to send someone to someone else to tell them about the Gospel, when God has called us to be the one to tell them about the Gospel! We act as if we are too busy, or it's too dangerous, or a pastor should do it.

It makes me wonder how many times has God called me to do something, and I ignored that call.

(Story of Holy Spirit telling me to go back in and pray for someone at grocery store)

Now here's the thing... I have no idea what impact my actions might have. But I don't need to know. Part of me wonders why God told Ananias what was going to happen to Saul in the long run. Maybe it was to give him motivation. I like to think so that it is 20-30 years down the road, Ananias steps back and looks at everything Saul did, and how the church was growing so much because of him, and Ananias is talking with God about it, and God is like, "See?!?! I told you!" And Ananias' faith grows leaps and bounds.

But the truth is, God may not tell us why He tells us to go to certain people. But the question to ask is, "What might you miss out on because you don't go?" What would have happened if Ananias didn't go?

Saul went on to become one of the greatest evangelists that ever lived. He is known more commonly by his other name, Paul. (By the way, His name wasn't changed. It was common for people to have 2 different names. Saul was his Jewish name, and Paul was his Roman name. As he preached to more Gentiles and Romans, he went by his Roman name, Paul, as time went on. An example today might be how some people go by their middle

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

name or even their last name when they are asked what their name is). He planted churches and trained pastors. Christianity exploded and spread like wildfire because of his actions. He wrote at least 13 books of the bible. Paul's actions have changed my life, and millions, and billions of others! What would have happened if Ananias didn't go?

So I sometimes have to ask myself, what might I miss out on because I don't go. How many people might not come to know Jesus just because I didn't share the gospel with one particular person? Here's the thing: **The reward far outweighs any risk.** It will always be worth whatever "bad" thing might happen for the gospel to be shared. We need to get the message to them whether or not they are willing to receive it. Because who are we to know their hearts? Who are we to judge whether or not it is "worth" the "risk" of sharing the Gospel with them because they might not accept it? (Isaiah 55:11 - The Word does not return void). Nobody should be written off or considered a lost cause, because guess what... we all are lost causes. If we think someone is "not good enough" or "ready enough" to hear and receive the Gospel, then we are discounting the power of God. The greatest miracle is someone receiving the free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. It's not healing. It's not the blind seeing or the deaf hearing. It is the eternal, never-fading, never-rusting gift of eternal life that only comes from the shed blood of Christ. It is a miracle. **(Luke 15:10 - there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.)** Why do you think angels throw a party when someone gives their life to Jesus? Because it's the best possible thing that could ever happen ever!) Your relationship with God is a miracle!!! Don't discount that!! Because if you do discount that, then you will discount what God can do in others. The hard hearted. The gross. The hateful. The fornicator. I say this because I know!!! I was the fornicator! I was full of hate. I was gross. I was hard hearted. But God swapped out my heart of stone and gave me a heart of flesh. If he can do it for me, he can do it for anyone! That's the attitude we need.

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

"Now hold on there a second, Pastor Tom." When you started out, Saul was a bad guy. I thought you said Luke was writing him to be the villain. He was! You see, Saul is not the protagonist of our story. And Ananias is not the protagonist. They aren't flawed heroes, either. It is God who the story is about, and HE is the protagonist.

Romans 5:8 states "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Verse 10 goes on to call us enemies of God. While we were enemies of God, Christ died for us!! Don't discount your own sin. Don't think you are better than others. "Oh, well at least I didn't murder somebody." No. Your sin makes you an enemy of God.

You see, Luke painted an outstanding picture of how Saul was an enemy of God. But God's love can overcome anything. It was the power of God through the Holy Spirit that changed Saul. (And what does that tell us? That it doesn't matter what we have done; God will still forgive us, and we can repent just like Saul, and lead a triumphant life that has a great positive impact for others and for the Kingdom of God.)

We are villains. I'm a villain. You're a villain. We are enemies of God. When we love something more than Him, when we disobey, rebel, and live our lives for ourselves rather than for Him, we are sinners who are against Him. And yet... while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Which means, that Christ died for our "enemies." Christ died for that guy who cut you off on the way to work last week. Christ died for the person who ripped you off. Christ died for those who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11th. Jesus came and lived a perfect life, and then died for those in Boko Haram, an extremist Islamic organization in West Africa that is bombing and killing innocent people. He died for those who bombed multiple churches in Sri Lanka this past Easter where over 250 people were killed.

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

If God can do it with Saul, who stood by and looked on approvingly as an innocent man who just preached about Jesus was stoned to death, why can't he do it with them?

God is constantly working in ways we don't know or understand. I ask myself, "Why Paul? Why the murderer and persecutor?" We might say he was undeserving of God's revelation of Himself to him. The thing is, we are all undeserving, too!!!! And who am I to question God's ways?!? If he wants to come down to earth and stand in front of someone to prove His existence, that's His prerogative. If I was God, would I have revealed myself to Paul? No way!!!! Good thing I'm not God, because then 13 books of the Bible would not have been written.

And how great is Paul's story?!? A murderer, a persecutor or the faith. A distinct and powerful enemy in direct opposition to Christ... becoming one of the biggest voices of Christianity. That God takes the enemy and uses him as His primary mouthpiece. Talk about turning things upside down!!! You couldn't write a better story. And just another example of the fact that the Gospel is for everyone!!! Even those who are against it.

Is there any other better story where everyone can win? Most people say, "We love to see justice." There is something within us that goes, "Yes!!! He got what he deserved. I loved the end of the movie when he got what was coming to him!" And yet, the better, more amazing, more unbelievable ending... the miracle ending... the almost too-good-to-be-true ending... is the one where the enemy becomes a friend. Where forgiveness is offered and received, and where reconciliation takes place. Now THAT is an amazing story. And that is what Luke offers in Acts.

The thing is, it is not just offered in the book of Acts. God offers it to each and everyone of us today.

Now what?:

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

- **Go!**

Ananias left his safe place. We need to leave, too. Notice how Ananias sought out Saul and how he went to where Saul was. We need to go where the people are. "Well they are the ones that need to come to church." That's not the right attitude and that's not how it works. We need to get out of these 4 walls. This is why we do the Egg Hunt. This is why we have a team from our church in Puerto Rico this week. What is God saying to you? Where do you need to go? (By the way... Hillcrest on 2nd Saturday and Broad & Olney on 4th Saturday of the month). You have no idea what God might be doing in someone else's heart, and God is just waiting for one of His people to share the good news with them. To quote Pastor Randy from a few weeks ago, "God uses His people to reach those who are not yet His people."

How many hearts are ready to receive Jesus, and yet God is just waiting for you to respond to his command, "go?"

- **Don't forget you were the bad guy**

Never think that you are above or have graduated from the Gospel. Remember Romans 5:8. I need the Gospel just as much today as I needed it when I first came to Christ. I am still a sinner who is only saved by the price Jesus paid. Well after Paul repented and planted churches and led many to Christ, he claimed he was the "chief of sinners." He never found his righteousness or hope apart from Christ. May we be the same.

- **Remember who the real enemy is.**

(Ephesians 6:12 - For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.)

Muslims are not our enemy. Republicans are not our enemy. Democrats are not our enemy. Catholics are not our enemy. Every other person in this world is just another person that needs Jesus. That's how we should view them. They may see us as their enemy, and even call us their enemy. But we are never to

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

view them, and definitely not treat them, as our enemy. As Ananias laid his hands on Saul to pray for him, he said, "Brother Saul." We should treat everyone as our brother and sister. Remember, the Gospel is for everyone. No matter how much you might dislike them. No matter how much they might dislike you. Oh, and How great is the message when delivered in such circumstances!!! "You are absolutely awful towards me, but let me do something nice for you." Let's turn the world upside down and make people's heads spin by how kind we can be and how much we can love. Oh, and if you have a prejudice or bias against a specific group of people, you are still supposed to show kindness and compassion to them while living out and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ! I'll pray that God works on your heart to see them the same way Jesus does. We see throughout the whole book of Acts the idea of inclusion. Everyone who is willing is welcome!!! Jews, Gentiles, Ethiopian Eunuchs, Roman centurions, scholars, the un-educated, fisherman, sinners, Muslims, Catholics, rich, poor, Democrats, Republicans, adulterers, murderers, fornicators, etc, etc...

If anyone is willing to admit that Jesus is Lord, and willing to surrender their life to following Him and His ways, then that is all that is needed. There are no pre-requisites required to following Jesus. They need to stop sinning. They need to purify themselves first. Did Jesus do that? No!! The fish were caught, and then the Holy Spirit did the cleaning.

- Pray for the persecuting

Don't just pray for the Christians around the world who are being persecuted and murdered for their faith. (Africa, China, Middle East). Pray that those who are doing the persecuting will come to faith in Christ. How impactful would their message be, if one day they are murdering Christians, and the next they choose to become a Christian? You know a message is great when one makes great sacrifices to deliver it. When they go through great difficulty and pain, and yet they still deliver that message. Paul had everything! He had power, status, and comfort. Yet he gave

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

it all away to become what he was attacking. He was shipwrecked, bitten by snakes, beaten, stoned, and imprisoned. He could have just walked away and never said a word about Jesus to anyone. But he didn't. I listen up real good when someone says that they changed their mind about something. Especially when they face great ridicule or persecution now that they believe in that new thing. That is probably one of the big reasons that Saul was so effective and so many people came to Christ because of him.

Paul gave up everything to preach the good news about Jesus. It was not easy. It was definitely not painless. So why do it?!?! Because it's worth it!

The early church was prosecuted to an extreme degree. Some people want to doubt the resurrection of Jesus Christ. How can you doubt when men gave their lives to preach it?!?!? When they could have said, "Just kidding! It's a lie. It's not true," and they would have lived their lives to a ripe old age. Instead, they were stabbed, crucified, burned alive, and stoned.

We need to pray for those who are being persecuted around the world. For provision, and protection. But we also need to be praying that those who are doing the persecuting, will have their eyes opened, and begin to follow Jesus. It only takes one to change the hearts and minds of many.

Conclusion:

When we pray here in a second, I want God to lay names and faces on your hearts and in your minds. There are people in your life, that need to know Him, and you need to share Jesus with them. For some of you, like Ananias, there may be people you may have not met yet, that God wants you to "Go" too. He is saying, "GO!" There may be people groups you are uncomfortable with. They may hate your kind. They may not like Christians. They may not like your skin color, whether it be white, black, brown, red, or yellow. They may not like or trust your gender! They may not root for the Eagles. They may not be from your country. They may not be in the same economic

Unstoppable: Saving the Enemy

7/28/19 - Pastor Tom

bracket as you. Maybe they voted for the current President. Maybe they didn't.

Stoppit! If there is one thing we have been seeing over and over again as we have been going through the book of Acts, it is this! That Jesus died for all, and His church is made up of anyone willing to follow Him. It doesn't matter what color they are or where they are from. Everyone needs Jesus! We have to stop classifying people and sticking them into groups of heroes and villains.

So I'm going to pray that God puts a passion in your heart, whether it be for an individual, or a group of people. And who knows, maybe there is a Saul among them. Maybe there is a Muslim man who hates Christians. And as soon as he comes to know Jesus, there will be a wildfire of conversions among Muslims all over the world. Maybe there is a Hindu woman, who will turn this world upside down, just because you shared Jesus with her. Maybe there is a young Jewish boy who needs hope, and you can show him that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the one who came to save not just the Jews, but everybody from their sins. And this young Jewish boy will share Jesus with Jews around the world in a way we never could!

How many hearts are ready to receive Jesus, and all they need is for you to go to them?

Small Group Questions:

- Where have you gone to share the Gospel? Why did you go?
- Has God ever told you to go somewhere or say something?
- Is there a specific type of person/people group you have felt called (or called now) to share the Gospel?
- Is there a person/group that you feel uncomfortable sharing the Gospel with? How come? What are practical ways to overcome that, and practical ways to share the Gospel with them?