

1. The 'theme tune' of Acts: The Certain, Unstoppable Kingdom of Jesus

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[0 : 00] Well, if you'd like to open your Bibles and stick a finger in the end of Luke's Gospel and one in the beginning of Acts, or else just look at the passages that we've printed out side by side, perhaps that'll be easier.

The subject tonight is the certain unstoppable kingdom of Jesus. Now, the Acts of the Apostles is a very dramatic book, sometimes called the history book of the early church, and that's true, but of course it's not the whole story.

At least, not if you imagine that it's just a collection of facts recorded, and no more than that. Just as the four Gospels are full of facts about Jesus' life and ministry, yet they're much, much more than that.

Well, so it is with Acts. It's a book with history, but it's a book also with a very clear message. But what is the message? That's a very important question.

Well, first of all, we need to notice that the first verse of the Acts reminds us that, as we've said, it is a second book, or part two of a two-volume work, the first being Luke's Gospel. That was volume one, where Luke says he told us about what Jesus began to do and teach until his ascension.

[1 : 17] And therefore, the clear implication is that this second volume is about what Jesus continued to do and teach after his ascension. The ascension of Jesus is the pivot point for Luke.

We saw that. His Gospel ends with Jesus' ascension, and Acts chapter one begins with an account of the ascension. So it's one story with a clear pivot point of Christ's ascension to glory.

Volume one tells us about what Jesus began to do in his earthly ministry, and volume two, that's the Acts, tells us what Jesus continues to do in his ministry from heaven.

Well, what's the purpose of all this? Let me suggest a summary. Luke wrote to record, defend, and explain the ministry of Jesus, both accomplished on earth and continuing from heaven.

He wrote, first of all, to record. Luke is certainly a historian. He wrote a careful, orderly account, he says, to Theophilus in the beginning of his Gospel.

[2 : 26] Eyewitness testimony, as well as his own careful researches. And many fellow historians down the years have remarked on the accuracy and the detail that Luke portrays.

This is most certainly a historical account of the ancient world. But he's not just a historian. He writes, he says, about things that are accomplished or fulfilled among us.

That is, things that were fulfilled, promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. That is, Luke is self-confessedly giving us a theological work. It's a book about religious truth.

So that brings me to the second thing about Luke. He's not just a historian. He's an apologist. He's writing to defend the ministry of Jesus, both his ministry on earth and subsequently from heaven.

Now, Theophilus, who he's writing to most probably is a Roman, very probably somebody of high rank. And the Romans, as you know, were probably very tolerant of a number of religions.

[3 : 27] There were many of them in the ancient empire. One thing they didn't like, though, is what we might call fundamentalist troublemakers. People who would create a public nuisance, who would offend many people, who would disrupt society.

The Romans would not tolerate something that threatened the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. And so one clear aim of Luke's writing is to show that Christians and the Christian faith was not ever like that.

So he's very careful, as you read through his book, to record that Roman officials never found any fault in Jesus of Nazareth, nor indeed in his apostles. He's very careful to record that some very high-ranking Roman people, sane Roman citizens, that they too accepted the gospel of Christ.

Men like Cornelius and others. And indeed, he's very careful to show that the Christian faith wasn't some kind of newfangled sect. No, it was the natural fulfillment of the faith of the Jews, a religion that had been long recognized by the Romans.

So, for example, when you get to chapter 23, he records Paul telling the people that it was because of his faith in the resurrection, the faith of the Pharisees, that he was on trial.

[4 : 42] So, unique as the message is, revolutionary as the message is, it's far from being violent or dangerous. It's not like some of these other things that arose in the ancient world.

No, the Christian faith is peaceable. It's reasonable. It's honest. It's good. Even when they were violently persecuted, as they are all through Acts, Christian believers never turned violent.

They never used coercion. They never retaliated. Luke defends the Christian faith. And that's a very important thing that we need to take into account today, isn't it?

When our world is equally suspicious of what it might call fundamentalism. We need to defend the Christian faith. Jesus never taught his followers to fly airplanes into buildings or blow themselves up.

His followers would give their lives as martyrs. Yes, they would. But to save the lives of others, not to kill them. So, Luke records and he defends. But above all, he explains the ministry of Jesus on earth and from heaven.

[5 : 48] Luke is an evangelist. He wrote about everything, he says, that was fulfilled according to the scriptures. Well, what is fulfilled? What is fulfilled, according to Luke, is all God's promises about salvation.

Howard Marshall, who was my New Testament professor in Aberdeen and has written extensively on Luke and Acts, Howard Marshall says that salvation is the central motif, the central theme in Luke's theology.

And if you read through his books, you'll see it's there from the beginning to the end. And it's a salvation that is for all the peoples of the earth. So, for example, back in Luke chapter 2, Simeon's song that we're all familiar with at Christmas, the Nunc Dimittis.

My eyes have seen your salvation, he says, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples. Next chapter of Luke, John the Baptist quotes from Isaiah at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

All flesh, he says, all flesh shall see the salvation of God. And so it's highly significant that on the day of Pentecost, in Acts chapter 2, Luke quotes again, this time from Joel, exactly the same words about what this all means.

[7 : 00] I will pour out my spirit, he says, on all flesh. You see, Luke is explaining what he records in his gospel and in Acts. He's explaining that it's all about the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation.

All that God promised is fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus on earth and in the ongoing ministry of Jesus from heaven, through the power of his Holy Spirit that comes upon his church.

The fulfillment of everything that God promised right back from the beginning, right back to the time of Abraham, to gather a people, do you remember, from every family of the earth, from all flesh, and to bless them forever through the seed of promise, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Through his personal work of salvation, his death and resurrection, and, says Jesus, through the proclamation of that gospel of salvation to all flesh in the power of the Spirit, despite all opposition that might arise.

And, he's explaining that because this is, all of it, the work of Jesus himself, because it's what Jesus began to do on earth, and is continuing to do from his throne of glory in heaven, then it must happen.

[8 : 22] It's certain. It's unstoppable. Unstoppable. The last word, interestingly, of Luke's little introduction that we read in verses 1 to 4 in the Greek, is the word certainty.

And, the very last word of the Acts of the Apostles, is unhinderedly, without hindrance, unstoppably, Paul proclaiming the kingdom of God.

You see, Luke is an evangelist, and his message, above all, is to proclaim the certain, unstoppable march of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. And, he's writing so that Theophilus and his friends and associates, whether they're yet Christians or not, and, by extension, so that we also, whether we're Christians yet or not, so that we might have certainty about what Jesus began to do on earth, and what he will certainly complete from heaven.

the establishing of his worldwide kingdom of glory. And, he writes that we might have certainty that everything that Jesus began will be accomplished, but also, about the way Jesus began, and the way he continues to establish his kingdom in this world.

So that we, too, can see and recognize the pattern of these realities in our own lives today. And so that we'll be encouraged to see that it is happening, just as God planned.

[9 : 45] And that we'll be excited to join in, and to play our part in that great fulfillment that continues in our own day, and is absolutely certain.

Now, we're going to focus, over the next few weeks, in some of the early chapters of Acts. It's not going to be an exhaustive study. We're looking at the early days of great significance for the church. And I think it's important for us, as a fellowship at this time, because we're living through days of great significance and change.

We're expecting God to be at work among us. We're looking forward to moving back to Buchanan Street, to taking up our new building, to having all the new opportunities that God is giving us through that.

So, if we're expecting God to be at work among us, we need to be prepared. We need to be sure that our expectations are right and not wrong. I hope we'll find these very timely studies for us, as a fellowship.

But tonight, I want to just paint, really, a few broad brush strokes, so that we can get Luke's big picture clear in the Acts of the Apostles. It's the kind of Rolf Harris bit, do you remember? Where some of you are too young to remember, that little thing with vision on, it was called.

[10 : 53] Remember, Rolf Harris would come on and put a few big brush strokes, and you'd just begin to see what was happening. So, we're not getting right into the detail. The detail that you get, you know, in a Kieran Dodds photograph, that has to wait for the next studies, but we're on the Rolf Harris tonight, the big broad brush strokes.

And here's four of them. We're thinking about the inevitable progression of the kingdom of the risen Jesus, the invincible power for that progression, the irrefutable pattern of that progression in the lives of God's people, and finally, our inescapable participation in that progression of his kingdom.

Four brush strokes. First, then, the inevitable progression of the kingdom of the risen Jesus. I said that the crucial hinge point in Luke's story is the ascension of the risen Jesus.

And I want to show you that the end of the Gospel of Luke focuses on that, and the beginning of Acts focuses on that, and especially on Jesus' words about the certain promise of the progression of his kingdom.

Luke draws very, very special attention to that, and that's why he repeats these things. You'll notice, probably, that in Luke chapter 24 and in Acts chapter 1, the disciples are rebuked.

[12 : 15] We didn't read the bit in Acts 24, but you remember, the angels say to the disciples, what are you doing? Twice. First of all, when they're looking into an empty grave, why are you looking into an empty grave? They say to them.

And then, as we did read in Acts 1.11, why are you gazing into an empty sky? In other words, he's saying to us, don't misunderstand what this means, the ascension of Jesus. Don't miss the meaning of the risen, ascended Lord.

You've got to be certain what this is all about. And Jesus himself is just as keen that his disciples get this clear. Look back to Luke 24, verse 44. It's a key passage, isn't it?

These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms, that's the whole Old Testament, must be fulfilled.

That's what they're to understand. So, verse 45. Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. Now, what is it he teaches them that must happen?

[13 : 14] Look at verse 46. First of all, it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day, rise from the dead. Now, that's asserted three times in Luke chapter 24.

First by the angel in verse 7, then on the Emmaus Road by Jesus in verse 26, and then again here. That what the Scripture said must happen. And what did happen?

Well, if you look at the red text I've highlighted in Acts chapter 1, verse 3, Jesus presented himself alive. He gave many convincing proofs of it.

He appeared not just once, but over 40 days. He spoke to them about the kingdom of God. It's certain, in other words, Luke is saying, just as the Scripture said.

And that means that the identity of the Christian church is certain too, isn't it? We're the people of the risen Lord. We're nothing else. The Christian faith isn't just Old Testament Judaism.

[14 : 13] It's about the coming and the fulfillment of the promise of the kingdom of God. The Christian faith isn't just a philosophy. It's not about politics. It's not about mysticism. It's real resurrection faith.

It's about the coming of the kingdom of God. But that's not all, is it, that Jesus says must happen. Look at verse 47. And repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.

You see, that's the whole message of the Old Testament faith he's saying. It goes right back to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. Salvation must extend to every nation of the earth.

That must happen. Don't miss that. That's what Jesus is saying. That's what Luke is recording. And so he records it again in Acts 1 verse 8. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

That must happen according to scripture he says. It's actually lifted those verses straight out of Isaiah the prophet. Read it later on in Isaiah chapter 43.

[15 : 22] You are my witnesses, the servant that I have chosen, declares the Lord. Well, says Jesus, you are my witnesses. And your mission must happen. Got to be accomplished.

And so not only the identity of the church as the people of the risen Lord, but the purpose and the calling of the church is certain too. And it's unstoppable. We're called to proclaim to the ends of the earth the kingdom of the risen Lord Jesus.

What God has promised he is fulfilling and he will do right till the end. It must be so, says Jesus.

That's a favorite phrase, by the way, of Luke's gospel. It's used 40 times in Luke and Acts. Luke and Acts. It must be. Don't you know I must be in my father's house, said Jesus in Luke 2.

I must preach the good news because that's why I've come. Luke 4, 43. The Son of Man must suffer many things and be killed and be raised. Luke 9, 22.

[16 : 26] And it goes on and on. In the future also, Jesus says, wars and tumults must take place before the end. Luke 21, verse 9. Because it's all according to God's determined plan and timetable.

And what God says must be, must be. So when we come to Acts chapter 1, verse 16, another witness of the resurrection must become the 12th apostle because the scriptures must be fulfilled.

Just as here in Acts 1, 8. The gospel must be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Just as Peter says also in the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, 23 that Jesus' death and resurrection according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God must take place.

And so also the work of the kingdom must take place through the proclamation of the gospel to all the nations. See, what Luke is telling us here and what Jesus is binning into the heads of his disciples before he goes to heaven is simply this.

God must win. God must win. It's not that Jesus is ascending to heaven and saying like Martin Luther King, I have a dream that perhaps maybe one day the gospel will go out to all the earth.

[17 : 47] But it's just a pipe dream. Absolutely not. It shall be done says Jesus. This is the risen Lord of glory who's stating it as fact.

The progress of the kingdom of Jesus is inevitable. It must be. I don't know about you but I find that immensely encouraging.

Don't you think that must have been incredibly encouraging to beleaguered Christians, persecuted Christians in the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries and beyond? Don't you think that message is a huge encouragement to persecuted Christians in Darfur today or in Pakistan or Afghanistan or other places where Christians are suffering bodily for the Lord Jesus' sake?

I think it's a great encouragement too isn't it? To us in the secularized West where it seems to be most of the time that it isn't happening. Isn't that right? You go out in the streets tonight and you go home and you turn on your television or the radio or whatever it is it doesn't seem to you or to me that God's kingdom must win.

Seems something so often like the kingdom of God is declining and not growing. But Jesus says no. the progress of my kingdom is inevitable.

[19 : 07] If Christ died in history and he did and was raised in history and he was then so also what he began to do on earth he will certainly complete from heaven.

We can be absolutely certain of that. That's why Luke's writing these things for us. And we mustn't be full of pessimism. We mustn't be Christians who are full of doubt and despair.

No. God must win. There's an inevitability about the progress of the kingdom of Jesus. But of course we do have questions don't we?

Because if the Lord Jesus has committed this task to human beings to the apostles and to those who come after him his church to people like us how can we possibly be so certain?

How can we be so certain that human beings can fulfill a task like that? It's one thing for Jesus to fulfill his ministry isn't it on earth? Quite another thing to be so confident about the future the fulfillment of the ministry of mere mortals.

[20 : 16] That's understandable isn't it? Well that brings us to the third thing that Jesus says here must happen and to our second heading in fact the invincible power for that progression of Christ's kingdom.

Look again at Luke 24 verses 48 and 49 You are witnesses of these things and behold I'm sending the promise of my Father upon you says Jesus.

That's vital to everything says Luke that's the key to this whole thing that's why he says it again in Acts chapter 1 verse 4 Wait for the promise of the Father that I told you about you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit he says and then in verse 8 He will be the power for you to be witnesses.

That's how you can be certain. That's how you can know that my kingdom will advance and the gospel will triumph to the very ends of the earth and to the very ends of the age because it's not just your work it's Jesus' own work.

It's what he directs himself from his throne in heaven through his spirit who he sends upon his church on the earth. Now the work of the Holy Spirit of course is a key, key emphasis all the way through the Acts of the Apostles but actually if you read through carefully through the book you'll see that explicit references to the spirit are very few and far between their current clusters.

[21 : 46] If you examine those clusters you'll find that every single one of them has the same emphasis. What is it? always the explicit ministry of the Holy Spirit is referred to in the context of empowering the church for mission.

It's always to do with evangelism. It's always to do with the church pushing out beyond its current place with the gospel to new frontiers. And it's all always associated with emboldening the believers to speak the word of God to proclaim the gospel.

That's the Holy Spirit's delight for the gospel to be proclaimed and for it to be proclaimed ever more widely and ever further in the world. So the spirit is promised in Acts chapter 1 to empower witness and he comes in chapter 2 at Pentecost to do exactly that.

What does he do? Acts 2 verse 4 he gives utterance to the apostles and they proclaim Jesus. Acts chapter 6 we read that the spirit especially guides them to the right people to solve the food crisis that had arisen so the apostles can devote themselves to the word of God and what do we read?

Is the result Acts 6 and 7 the word of God continue to increase. By the way that's Luke's phrase for church growth all the way through Acts. He doesn't talk so much about church growth he talks about the word increasing and growing and magnifying.

[23 : 15] In Acts chapter 8 you have again an explicit reference to the Holy Spirit and it's all about bringing the gospel ministry beyond Jerusalem and Judea and into Samaria. Same thing in Acts chapter 10 it's the spirit who propels Peter quite reluctantly actually Peter was but the spirit propels him to the household of Cornelius and the first Gentile believers and the result Acts 11 verse 1 Gentiles also received the word of God.

Same in chapter 16 when the spirit compels Paul and Silas across to Macedonia the first encounter of the gospel beyond the shores of Asia Minor into Europe proper.

Same thing in Acts chapter 20 it's the spirit who propels Paul towards Rome he tells him he'll suffer imprisonments and beating and affliction but he must testify in Rome. And you see the pattern the Holy Spirit is at work always and he's determined to fulfill everything that Jesus said must happen.

He's always pushing the church outwards and onwards. Sometimes it's against great inertia we'll see that in Acts but always he's enabling the word of God to increase and to grow and to advance and he will never stop and he will never tire of that task until Jesus himself comes again in person.

It must happen. So if you want to ask the question how can we as Christians today how can we be confident that the church's gospel identity will be preserved despite sin there's plenty of that in our churches isn't there?

[24 : 58] Despite opposition despite inertia exhaustion all of these things how can we be sure that the church's gospel purpose will reach all nations that really will be fulfilled as Jesus said through frail human witnesses like us how can we be sure?

The answer is through the power of the risen Lord Jesus commanding his rule from heaven through his Holy Spirit at work in the church and in the world.

That's how we can be sure. It's his work. That's what Luke's saying the work Jesus began to do he is continuing to do. It's no less his work than his work on earth and it must happen and he accomplishes it as he gives boldness and as he gives utterance to his people to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom and no power of hell no scheme of man in this world will ever be able to stop that because it's the incredible amazing power of the Holy Spirit.

I've just spilled my glass of water all over my feet. But even that can't stop the advance of the kingdom of God. I'll get a ride for my wife when I get home but anyway that doesn't matter.

One example of that is Acts chapter 4 that we'll come to because the Christians are being persecuted the apostles have been put in prison they've been let out and they're praying to God what are they praying to God?

[26 : 31] Not for rescue. but for boldness to speak the word. So Acts chapter 4 verse 29 they pray grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with boldness while you perform signs and wonders.

And what's the result? They were filled with the Holy Spirit and what did they do? Continued to speak the word of God with great boldness. And we go on to read about the growth and the livelihood of the church.

And that is the invincible power of Jesus at work on earth. His spirit giving utterance to his word in the mouths of his people. His spirit at work to increase and strengthen his kingdom.

The word of God continued to increase. That's what you read all the way through the Acts of the Apostles. That's very very important for us to note that. It means that we can have confidence great confidence in the purpose of God being worked out on this earth.

But not because of ourselves. Not because of any power we might have. Only only because of God's spirit and his invincible power. It's what Jesus said isn't it in the upper room.

[27 : 44] Without me you can do nothing. And remember that. But abide in me ask of me yes you'll bear much fruit he says.

And that means doesn't it that we need prayer to God all the time for him to be at work. For his spirit to be at work in the midst. It means that ultimately it's not ever going to be strategic thinking that builds the kingdom.

Although there's plenty of strategic thinking in the book of Acts and we must learn from the tactics of the apostles. It's not ever going to be just training people in handling the Bible or speaking that's going to build the kingdom of Christ.

Although that's essential too and we're explicitly commanded to do that in Acts and elsewhere. Nor is it ever going to be just correct theology or doctrine. Of course that's vital. But total dependence on and prayer for the invincible power of the spirit of the risen Lord.

That's what we need. And for him to grant utterance that we might speak his word boldly. And I think that's very important for us as a fellowship to remember right at this moment.

[28 : 54] We're thinking about a new building and all the opportunities that that's going to give us and that's great. But Jesus says without me you can do nothing. Will God be at work in our midst through all the new opportunities he's going to give us in Buchanan Street?

Can God work miracles, signs and wonders as people are drawn into the kingdom and their whole lives changed and their whole future changed and their eternal future changed? Can God do these things through people like us?

The answer is yes, it's certain. That's his mission. Only his invincible power can actually do that. We can't do it. And if we want his empowering presence in the midst of us we must be praying to God and must be praying in line in line with what Acts teaches us about what God's clear priority is and what the interest of his Holy Spirit is.

Isn't that right? That the name of Jesus will be declared in ever expanding circles so that more and more of this city and this nation are reached with the gospel. The word of the gospel is spoken with more and more boldness.

There's no such thing, absolutely no such thing in the book of Acts or anywhere else in the New Testament as silent evangelism. It's the gospel that is the power of God for salvation.

[30 : 19] That's very important. It's important for us to be clear about that. We need to be asking God and we need to be asking him for what his spirit wants to be doing through us, giving us boldness to proclaim the word and giving us a desire to make that word ever more known in every opportunity that we have.

And it's vital that we remember that it is his invincible power that does this. We need to remember that because it doesn't always seem to be so, does it? It seems to us so often that the gospel lacks power.

In fact, sometimes it even seems that the gospel puts people off. Therefore, we can want to tone down the gospel. That brings me to the third thing. It's the irrefutable pattern of true gospel proclamation that builds the kingdom.

And it's something that we see all the way through Acts and all the way through the New Testament that true, true gospel proclamation always divides. So in Acts 14, in Iconium, the people of the city were divided.

Some sided with the opposition, some with the apostles. Same in Athens in Acts 17. Some mocked, others said, we'll hear you more on this subject. It's just two examples, but it's a pattern all the way through Jesus' earthly ministry, you see it in Luke's gospel, all the way through his heavenly ministry, through the apostles too, and in the church today and tomorrow until the very end.

- [31 : 49] That's why Acts 14, verse 22 is such a vital truth that Paul insisted on teaching the churches. Do you remember after he had evangelized the churches of Asia Minor, he went back to teach them and to strengthen them?

What did he teach them? Acts 14, verse 22, that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of heaven. Yes, the progress of the gospel is inevitable.

Yes, the power of the spirit is invincible. So we're not to be pessimists, we're not to despair, but there's equally no place is there for false optimism, for triumphalism.

There's no hint of that anywhere through the Acts of the Apostles. A third of the whole book is taken up describing for us Paul's hardships and struggles and persecutions. And what Luke is saying to us is that's the real Christian life.

That's real Christian ministry and mission. Why? Because it's not yet the time of complete fulfillment.

- [32 : 52] It's not yet the final consummation. It's not yet the time for the restoration of the kingdom that the disciples were asking about in chapter 1 verse 6. When that might be exactly, nobody knows, says Jesus, not the apostles, the Father's timing.

They don't speculate. Same as what he said in Matthew 24, do you remember? Don't try and calculate the date of my return. No, that time will come and that time will be when all troubles and tribulation will cease.

But it's not now. Now is the time for witness. Now is the day of harvest. It's the day of calling out from the ends of the earth all those who are being saved. But, listen, just as Jesus' spirit-filled ministry on earth was opposed all the way at every stage by Satan from hell, so it will be for the spirit-filled ministry of true Christian believers.

Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of heaven. What did Jesus say back in Luke chapter 9? The Son of Man must suffer, be put to death and die.

And in the very next verse, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. It's a very interesting exercise, something I did just the other week, was to trace all the way through Luke's gospel and Acts the opposition that's recorded.

- [34 : 17] It's absolutely striking, the parallels that you see. Quite deliberate, surely, on Luke's part. Luke chapter 3, John the Baptist begins preaching repentance and so he's thrown into prison.

Acts chapter 3, Peter preaches repentance and he's thrown into prison. Luke chapter 4, Jesus begins his ministry and is attacked by the devil and his temptation in the wilderness.

Acts chapter 5 and 6, Satan explicitly attacking the church right at its inception. The story of Ananias and Sapphira, the grumbling about the widows.

Luke 9, Jesus predicts his own suffering. Acts chapter 9, Paul is called on the road to Damascus and Jesus teaches him all the things that he must suffer for the sake of Christ.

Luke 13, Herod wants to kill Jesus. Acts chapter 12, Herod kills James and puts Peter in prison. Same in Luke chapter 20, Jesus is opposed by the Sadducees.

- [35 : 13] Acts chapter 23, Paul opposed by the Sadducees. Luke 22, Jesus begins four trials, all of them a mockery. In Acts 22, Paul himself also undergoes four trials.

There's many more parallels I could go through, but you see the pattern. Jesus' earthly ministry must be fulfilled, and it was fulfilled along a path of suffering and death.

So it will be with his heavenly ministry on earth through the church. It must be fulfilled in the same way. That's what spirit-filled ministry looks like.

The indisputable pattern of the progression of the gospel of the kingdom all the way through Acts is that through many tribulations and against much opposition the kingdom of Christ will advance.

Friends, it's going to be that way right till the very end of the age. Don't listen to anybody who tells you otherwise. There never ever will come a time until Jesus comes when on earth all the opposition to the gospel will disappear.

[36 : 21] When all the struggles of the church, when all the struggles in your Christian life will disappear. Not until Jesus comes. That's the indisputable pattern in Acts. It's the irrefutable teaching of the apostles all through the New Testament.

It's the mark of all the last days. And yet, the kingdom does and will progress unhinderedly.

Despite all of that, we can be certain. Despite all the focused attacks of the evil one, the attacks that come from outside the church and inside the church.

Attacks that come on the true identity of the church, attacking its message, attacking its true kingdom lifestyle. And attacks on the purpose of the church, the true ministry of an expansion of the gospel vision all through the world.

We'll see that all through Acts and it's so striking and contemporary. Because in that respect, the opposition that we see in Acts is just exactly the opposition that we see to the gospel today.

[37 : 23] And one of the most striking things is that so often the chief opponents of the gospel are those in the religious establishment of the day. Those who claim to worship the same God, to have the same faith.

You see, some in the book of Acts, just as today, some reject the message because it is unquestionably supernatural. That's the Sadducees that we'll meet in chapter 4 and later on, the rationalists of their day.

They rejected the very thought of resurrection, the very thought of anything supernatural, even when the evidence was right in front of them as it was with a healed man. Well, it's just the same today, isn't it?

Many liberals and rationalists, they refuse to submit to God's revelation that comes from heaven, a word of authority that comes down. It offends the pride of those who worship, really, their own reason, their own brains.

Some in Acts, just again as today, some of them reject the message because it's a message about universal sinfulness. So when Peter calls them to repent in chapter 5, they're enraged, they want to kill him.

[38 : 28] Don't call us to repent. And in chapter 7, when Stephen calls them to repent, they're enraged, they want to kill him. They do kill him. It's just the same today.

Plenty who will not be summoned to repent. Often terribly offensive to the religious person, just like the Pharisees, who've got great belief in their own righteousness.

For them, it's not a problem to accept the supernatural, to accept resurrection. They may have perfect doctrine. They may be very proud of the perfect doctrine. I've been a believer all my days, they say.

But don't you dare tell me I need to repent. Because, you see, the truth is they can't stand those religious kind of people.

They can't stand a gospel that tells them that they're just as much of a sinner as those nasty tax collectors and sinners and prostitutes and people like that. They can't stand the fact that some Johnny-come-lately to the church, who's got a very checkered background, is just in the same place as someone like them, who's been a pillar of the church.

[39 : 34] And so they gnash their teeth. They gnash their teeth when there's evidence of the true kingdom of God being built in such people's lives. Some reject the message, of course, then, as now, because it's a message about a unique saviour.

Again, Acts chapter 4. They're mad because the apostles proclaimed Jesus as the only name under heaven by which we must be saved. No, no, we can't have that exclusivity. We'll have any name, in fact, apart from that name, because they refuse to submit to the unique rule, the unique authority of the lordship of Jesus.

Do you see how nothing has changed in the human heart between then and now? Just the same today. Many people, many religious people, church people, reject a gospel that's unquestionably supernatural, that has revelation from God at its heart.

Or that preaches a gospel of universal sinfulness that has repentance at its heart as its great demand. Or that claims a unique saviour that has the rule of Jesus and its claim upon your life as the great demand.

people love a bit of churchianity, even perhaps a good dollop of apparently evangelical churchianity. But don't you dare disturb their comfortable religion.

[40 : 56] But you see, the message of Acts is that the true gospel does disturb us. It always disturbs us. Because our hearts, as John Calvin once put it, our hearts are perpetual factories of idols.

idols. And we're always fashioning our own idols. Idols that we dress up, of course, if we're Christians, in Christian clothing. But in reality, just tools for our own self-justification.

But you see, when the true gospel of the true spirit of God, that's animated by the true mission of Jesus, when that dares to touch upon our idols, and that's very often what angers and maddens religious people today.

makes them gnash their teeth and oppose the advance of the kingdom. As, of course, do totally irreligious people. We see them in Acts 2. It's interesting. Their idols may be different.

On the two occasions, only two in Acts, when Gentiles turn violent against the apostles, both times, it's when their property and their prosperity are touched.

[42 : 01] In chapter 16 in Philippi, when the slave girl is healed and can't make money for her owners anymore, and in chapter 19, when the idol makers and silversmiths lose their trade because so many people are being converted.

And their idols are being threatened. Their idols are money, of course. The wealth that gives them freedom and self-determination, or thinks that they do. Again, that's just the same today, isn't it?

The true gospel of Jesus will always offend the religious, the person who thinks he can be righteous by his own acts, by religion. But it will also offend the irreligious, who thinks he can be free by rejecting religion, by pursuing material things.

You see, that's the irrefutable pattern of kingdom growth in Acts, and through history, and in the church today, that key advances of the gospel always take place against great opposition, opposition without, and opposition within.

Through many tribulations, means we must enter the kingdom. And against much opposition, we proclaim and live the kingdom. But, the kingdom of God is unstoppable.

[43 : 12] In the end, even the wrath of man must praise him. Peter says, remarkably, that the devil, in succeeding, in killing, and crucifying the Lord Jesus Christ, all he managed to do was accomplish the purpose of God from before the foundation of the world for salvation.

So it must be, every opposition against the kingdom of Christ today will be turned to the glorious advancement. But it will be through much anguish.

And that means that the last brush stroke we have to consider tonight is this. Our inescapable participation in the progress of that kingdom. The pattern of the kingdom advance is irrefutable.

Scripture and history and our experience tell us of the struggles of Christ's church always. But the power of the Holy Spirit of Jesus is invincible and therefore the progress, the ultimate triumph of Jesus' kingdom is inevitable.

It is unhinderable. But that presents a challenge, doesn't it? It presents the challenge as to which side you are going to be on.

[44 : 23] Some people want to hinder Christ's kingdom. They try to hinder it. They try to oppose it. But you see, the risen ascended Lord of glory says that can't happen and his kingdom must advance.

The gospel will reach all nations. Repentance and forgiveness in his unique name will be proclaimed. And that means if you are not a Christian, if you haven't submitted to the Lord Jesus Christ, you need to know that you are opposing the settled will of Almighty God and you can't win.

God must win. And if you are a Christian, you also need to know that your very identity means that you are one of the people who belong to the body of this Jesus.

And this gospel and this Holy Spirit's determined purpose is that mission should be the absolute priority of your life and your calling and mine. It's what we're called to be for in the church.

That mission is our whole purpose of being on earth. That's why we're created. And the way we live our life, the way we think, the way we act, the way we prioritize our time and our money and our talents and everything, all of that will either be one thing or the other.

[45 : 43] Either progressing that vision with Jesus or persecuting that vision and persecuting Jesus.

That was Saul, wasn't it, in Acts chapter 9? Jesus said, I am Jesus whom you're persecuting. Of course, Saul didn't think he was persecuting. He thought he was serving God. He was very religious.

He was a Pharisee of Pharisees. He had perfect evangelical doctrine. But he was utterly parochial, wasn't he, in his attitude. We're the people, not these outsiders, not these pagans.

And he was utterly prideful in his heart, wasn't he? We know it all. We've got our heritage. We don't need this new thing. And God had to humble him totally, didn't he?

And to make him realize that he said himself later, actually he was just ignorant. His heart was full of unbelief. And that's a real lesson, isn't it? It's a real challenge.

[46 : 41] It's a challenge for somebody like me, who has been in an evangelical church for decades, who's possessed a great heritage like that, like Paul's. But that's not the issue for me, is it?

Or for you, if you've got a great heritage like that. The issue is this. How am I participating now, now, today, in the great unstoppable purpose of the kingdom of the risen Jesus?

Am I participating as a hinderer or as a helper? That's the question for me. Is my heart really attuned to the heart of Jesus so that whatever the cost to me, I'll follow him and give everything I have and everything that I am to speed on that unstoppable kingdom of his to the very ends of the earth?

You see, I can't not participate in that unstoppable mission, can I? I'm going to participate one way or the other, as a helper or as a hinderer. And whichever one it is, listen to this, it's not going to affect the outcome of God's plan for this world.

If I decline to be a helper, it will be no loss to the great cause. His kingdom will progress. It's inevitable. But I should think it will make an eternity of difference to me, won't it?

[48 : 00] To be a hinderer of the gospel, either by design or by default. A challenge, isn't it? I find it challenging. It's a challenge to each of us and it's a challenge to us as a church.

You remember David Cook of the Sydney Missionary Bible College who preached here last year. In his book on Acts, he says this, A church that claims to be Christian, yet has no concern to get the gospel beyond its own doors, is not a Christian church.

But you see, the book of Acts is in our Bibles so that we won't ever be like that. The progress of the kingdom of Jesus is unstoppable.

It's inevitable because his spirit is invincible. God must win. What Jesus began, he will bring to completion. So why would you and I want to give our lives, and our lives together, here as a church, why would we want to give it to anything less than full and joyful participation in that glorious mission?

Proclaiming his name, proclaiming his salvation, pushing it onwards to the ends of the earth until the day that he comes. Let's keep one another to that great task, shall we?

[49 : 25] Until the day the Lord Jesus comes, whenever that is. I need your help, and I guess perhaps you need mine too. Well, let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that the kingdom of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is certain, and it's unstoppable.

And we thank you that you've called us to it, and given us a gospel to proclaim, to speed its coming. So would you forgive us, Lord, when our hearts are lukewarm, and breathe your breath of life in us again, that we might side with the glorious advance through the invincible power of your Holy Spirit, as we see Jesus glorified among us, and many bowing the knee to him, and rejoicing with us in his name.

For we ask it in his name's sake. Amen.