Built
Week 8: Built to Last
Acts 8:1-4

Share story about Jesus Freak album.

A year into following Jesus, dc Talk and an organization called Voice of the Martyrs released a book called Jesus Freak. It was a collection of stories about Christians across history who suffered or died because of their faith. Stories about real life Jesus Freaks. Reading that book challenged my faith. Not in a way that made me doubt God or His goodness, but in a way that made me look in the mirror.

God used the album to awaken my heart to Him and He used this book to help me start seeing that Christianity isn't just "Jesus will make my life better" so I'll follow Him. It's "Jesus is worthy of my life." Christianity isn't about following Jesus because He gives me the things I want, or makes my life easier. Following Jesus is an invitation to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. Or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Following Jesus isn't an invitation to add something to our life that will make all of our struggles and problems magically disappear. It's an invitation to surrender our life and follow Him into the struggles and problems that we face. And, sometimes, those struggles and problems come as a direct result ***of*** following Him. That's what we see in our text today.

(Built to Go, but early on, the Church largely just stayed. Church in Jerusalem grew, things were going well. Acts 7 – Stoning of Stephen. The first Christian martyr. Acts 8:1a.)

This ushers in a new era for the Church and followers of Jesus. Acts 8:1-3.

Let's not rush past this. Stephen, a leader in the local Church, a man filled with wisdom and the Holy Spirit, he was murdered for his faith in Jesus. People who had political and religious power approved of his murder and now families are being dragged from their homes. People are being thrown into prison. Luke says that a "great persecution broke out against the church."

People are losing their sense of security, their community, freedom, and sometimes life itself. The future of the Church literally hangs in the balance of how these first followers of Jesus respond to this moment. How do they respond when people start dying, when their leaders are arrested, when all of the sudden, following Jesus costs something? Do they keep the faith, or do they throw in the towel and walk away, leaving this Jesus movement dead in its tracks? Acts 8:4.

Let's not rush past that.

Week 1: Built Different. Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Leave on screen.)

Gates are a defensive structure. You build a gate to keep something out; to protect against what's *out there.* But look at the picture Jesus paints with these words. It's not a picture of Hell attacking the Church's gates, it's a picture of the Church attacking the gates of Hell. Jesus didn't built His Church and then say, "Okay, everyone get inside where it's safe and just hold on tight until I return."

No, He says go out into all the world, places where Satan has claimed for His own and is trying to protect, ***storm the gates of Hell*** and help people find and follow me. Jesus built His Church to advance into the darkness of this world, and the darkness has not, cannot, and will not overcome it!

That's what we see in Acts 8. Twice in our passage, Luke says that the Church was scattered. It's an interesting word.

"Scattered" = Diaspeiro (compound word)
Dia – through, across, throughout
Speiro – to sow or scatter seed
Definition: *"Seed being scattered broadly across an area."*

Spent several hours this week doing leaf removal and giving my yard a final mow for the season. Over the next few months, the grass will go dormant and stop growing. And in the Spring, when things start coming back to life, my annual battle with dandelions will begin.

And if you fight that same valiant battle, you know how hard it can be, especially when they seed…(show picture). The seeds just blow in the wind and scatter across the entire yard. And then kids come along and find it so much fun to pick them up and blow on them. Or kick them and watch the seeds…*poof*…up into the air.

That's the image this word is creating. Saul thinks he's scattering Christians to get rid of them, but God is scattering missionaries out into the world. He's scattering them into the places Jesus told them they would go…Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. You see, persecution does not derail Jesus' mission, it accelerates it. It poured gasoline of the fire of faith and it begins to spread across the world.

Jesus built His Church to last. To not just survive persecution and hardships, but to thrive through it, storming the gates of Hell and advancing God's Kingdom in the places and people Satan has claimed as his own. Reclaiming them for the Lord.

What we see in Acts 8 continues today. I asked Brad, our Global Outreach Director, to share some stories from some of our mission partners…

> A bible study in North India was interrupted when an angry husband of a woman in the room busted in the door and beat the pastor leading the study to the floor. He grabbed his wife and drug her out of the room. Several weeks later the pastor received word that the man that had beaten him was seriously ill. The pastor took a doctor who was friendly to the mission to the abusive man's home. With medical care from the physician and prayers from the pastor, the man eventually recovered. Weeks later the abusive man interrupted the study again. All were fearful of him - but this time he embraced the pastor, begging his forgiveness and asking to know the God that he follows. The abusive man is now a sincere follower of Jesus.
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> Several years ago, a group from SOCC was asked to visit and pray for an Indian pastor who was recovering from 11 knife wounds to his torso from a Hindu extremist attack during a bible study in his home. The team was asked to pray against his fear, and that he would be able to go back to the same neighborhood to teach about Jesus. It was difficult to pray this prayer because we were concerned for his life. However, we prayed as we were asked. This disciple maker fully recovered and returned to teach in his neighborhood. He now has a growing church comprised of the neighbors who witnessed his courage and boldness. It was contagious.
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> Pastors in China regularly face hardships, and for many of them, their qualifications for ministry includes the number of years they've spent in prison for their faith.

That's not on my resume. Most of us have never been beaten or stabbed because of our faith. We didn't walk in here this morning hoping no one saw us out of fear of losing our jobs or family.

And I don't tell these stories this morning as a guilt trip. We shouldn't walk out of here this morning feeling guilty because our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world suffer for their faith more than we do. We don't live in their culture, so we can't demonstrate the same kind of faith.

I tell them for a couple of reasons. First, Scripture tells us to remember them. Hebrews 13:3 says, "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." Across the world, today is a day set aside to remember and pray for the persecuted Church.

But I also share these stories because, even though we don't face the same kind of pressure to turn from Jesus that our brothers and sisters around the world do, we still have our own temptations. We have our own pursuits and comforts that keep us quiet. That make us fall back into the "I follow Jesus because He makes my life better," category instead of the "Jesus is worthy of my life" one.

So, I share these stories to raise our awareness, which hopefully triggers our empathy, leading us to prayer, and ultimately, courage to stand firmly on our own faith, even when it's hard. We may not have Saul knocking on our door, threatening us for our faith, but something is always trying to domesticate our devotion to Jesus.

Something, or someone, is always trying to make us back off when Jesus gives us an opportunity to be bold. To stay quiet when we have a chance to share.

Comfort – "I'll follow Jesus as long as it doesn't cost too much."

Approval – "I'll follow Jesus as long as people don't think I'm weird."

Distraction – We don't deny our faith in Jesus, we just have so many other things going on that he slowly gets pushed off to the side.

Fear – Satan doesn't always need us to walk away from our faith. He'll be happy if our faith just becomes harmless. We stop taking risks for Him because we're afraid of what will happen if we really trust Him.

Over time, we just decide, consciously or subconsciously, to leave the whole *storming the gates of Hell* thing to those super-Christians and settle for a Jesus we hope will just make our lives better.

But I want to go back to Acts 8 again as we close, because this is the part that absolutely fascinates me.

"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and ***all except the apostles*** were scattered. Those who were scattered ***preached the word wherever they went***." (Acts 8:1b, 4)

Do you see it? The Apostles, the super-Christians who had been with Jesus, they stayed in Jerusalem. All EXCEPT them were scattered and they preached the word wherever they went.

Just ordinary Christians like you and me, carrying Jesus into ordinary places. And our witness storms the gates of Hell because it stands in such contrast to the world around us.

In a culture of outrage, followers of Jesus practice gentleness.

In a culture of accumulation, we practice generosity.

In a culture of self-promotion, we practice humility.

In a culture of isolation and tribalism, we practice hospitality and loving our neighbor.

In a culture of revenge, followers of Jesus forgive.

In a culture of fear, we trust.

In a culture of cheap relationships, we remain faithful.

Jesus told his disciples, “I will build my Church” and He has built us to last. For 2,000 years, kingdoms have risen up and fallen away. Empires have come and gone. Governments have tried to silence Christians. Believers have been imprisoned. Churches have been burned. Martyrs have died.

And Jesus is still building His Church.

Because through it all, the seeds continue to scatter and grow. The Gospel continues to be preached. Jesus is still showing up. And we continue to be people who scatter with the good news of Jesus into our neighborhoods and schools and offices and teams and friendships.

Followers of Jesus don’t just survive the darkness of our world, we bring light into it. We aren’t just defending our faith or hiding in our holy huddle, trying to stay safe, we are the light of the world.

And sometimes it costs us something, but to live is Christ and to die is gain. So, come what may, Jesus will build His Church…and the gates of hell has not, cannot, and will not overcome it.

Invitation/Response
Call to come and die to find real, lasting, and eternal life in Him.

Remember Jesus who gave Himself for us.