Well, good morning, good morning, good morning. If you were part of our weekend extravaganza down on Harp Commons this past Friday, you saw some amazing stuff. Thousands of kids. I don't know, I would say I put a close estimate, 98,000 children were down there. Maybe not quite that, maybe not quite that.

But what I also— I saw, I had one of the local judges come up and say, this is incredible, Tim. Thank you for putting this on. I'm like, I didn't do diddly squat. We have a lot of people who do a few things and they make it happen. So if you were part of that, whether you served on the food team wrapping up 1,200 hot dogs, which were gone, Whether you were popping popcorn or handing out water or cleaning up, whether you were setting up tents, whether you were holding up precious little puppies to be smooched at the Smooch-a-Pooch tent, whether you were fishing, whether you were doing photographs, whatever you were doing, thank you very much.

That is a— that's not just something fun we do. We get to bless our community by doing that. We get to provide family is a safe place to be, an opportunity for us to just be light and life. And no one's down there preaching on street corners. We're just showing up and we're being who we are in Jesus, the best church for our community.

So thank you very much. If you want to turn to someone and say, thank you very much for the way you serve.

We are in a series. If you're joining us for the very first time, I just want to warn you right now, we're going to be talking about persecution. We're talking about the church, really. And the, the weeks that we've gone through this, we've been talking about what Jesus designed the church to be. And so we're talking about just the uncertainty of the times we live in.

I had a conversation with a, with a relative this past week, and, and we were having coffee, and as it often turns, it, you know, turns to politics at some point. And she was talking about something that's not even happening in the United States. But something that was happening far away. And she goes, have you heard about this? I'm like, well, no, I, I don't, I don't think I, I don't think I heard— I've heard about it.

She goes, well, do you know da da da da da? And I go, yeah. And she goes, well, what do you think about it? I go, I, I mean, not much. She goes, are you not worried about this?

I said, well, I mean, not overly. Have you not been following what's going on? Well, I mean, not religiously. Aren't you concerned about how this will affect Christians? I go, I mean, not, not really.

You know they're going to kill Christians, don't you? I go, well, I

guess we'll find out.

Why aren't you concerned? She said, why aren't you concerned? Do you not get upset about anything? I'm like, listen, I got enough. I got enough to get upset about.

I can't be borrowing trouble. The truth is, I, I do— I leave those conversations wondering, and maybe you do too, should I be more aware of what's happening around the world? Should I be more concerned? Should I be spending more time studying and researching and, and anticipating the tactics or the plans, the schemes of the enemy against the church, against the gospel? I don't know, does anyone else besides me sometimes feel like, do I care enough about other things happening in other places, or even the things happening right around us?

Maybe you've asked yourself the same question. But there are 2 reasons why I, I think, I think my approach is pretty healthy, and I think my approach is pretty holy. And here's why. And this is not to excuse me or my just laissez-faire approach to life. But here's, here's what I know: when something is beyond my personal control, I try not to let it consume my thoughts.

Does anyone understand what I'm saying when I say that? That doesn't mean I don't care. That doesn't mean that I am not concerned. It just means that I pray about it I pray over it, and then I do what is right in front of me that God has put in front of me for me to do. Yes, that — so much spiritual peace and mental peace comes when we just do the thing that's in front of us.

But secondly, that's all based on something we've talked about as we've gone through this series. When Jesus is speaking to his disciples there, as Alan shared, in front of the mouth of that cave where all that pagan worship happened, that has had this, had this just, um, reputation of darkness and, and, and evil. Jesus is standing right there in front of that dark cavernous place, and he says, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome empower it. That verse right there has such a powerful impact on the way I think about the world around us. Does that mean that there aren't very concerning things happening in the United States, happening around the world, that, that pose a threat to the church?

Does that mean that there's not that? Of course not. There are things. There are many things in this world that are seeking to hinder and stop the spread of the Gospel. If you're following the news at all, and maybe you do a better job than I do of this, but if you're studying what's happening in Iran, yes, there's a lot of political stuff happening in Iran, but Iran ranks as one of the most extreme environments for believers.

Converts from Islam to Christianity can face arrest, they can face imprisonment, And they can even be executed under Iran's national security laws and blasphemy laws. Iran is a very challenging place for the gospel. Africa. Africa is a predominantly Christian country. So many Christians are there, and yet it's an enormous continent, and a lot of bad things happen there too.

Militant groups like Boko Haram, many of you are familiar with them, Fulani militants, Al-Qaeda and ISIS are still present there in Africa, and their networks, their groups have burned Christian villages, they've arrested Christian leaders, they have destroyed churches. Africa is still a global epicenter of anti-Christian violence. China, many of us grew up with China as the great communist threat. Well, the Chinese Communist Party hasn't let up. They're tightening not just, not just the on-the-ground rules, but digital rules now.

Digital controls are very tightly monitored. Unauthorized religious content is absolutely banned. Livestreams have been shut down. Pastors, leaders, Christians have been, have been imprisoned. In India, I love Indian food, but I tell you, India is a hard spot for believers these days.

There are Hindu nationalists and strict anti-conversion laws that are leading to hundreds of very violent incidents targeting churches, pastors, and worship services. All of that is very concerning, even to us living in relatively peace and quiet here in southern Indiana. I do not want to be dismissive because we live in a place of relative peace. I don't ever want to come across as dismissive of those very challenging places of ministry around the world.

But when you read Scripture, it is very helpful to read and remember that from the very beginning, the enemy has attempted to silence the church.

In those times, When we're feeling threatened, when we're feeling afraid, it's tempting to, to retreat, to become separate and go into our little huddles. But, but as we're going to read today, in those times where the future is uncertain and even safety is uncertain, Jesus calls us as disciples to not step back but to step forward. Not in an aggressive mode, but in faithfulness as disciples. And for a very good reason, as we will read about today. We're going to be in the book of Acts, and if you've got your Bibles, you can go ahead and turn to Acts chapter 8.

But we're going to see that it— the attempts to silence the gospel and shut down the preaching and teaching of Jesus doesn't stop its spread. In fact, just the opposite. So open your Bibles if you've got them, your Bible apps if you need them. If you don't have either, we'll have some scriptures on the screen, um, but we're gonna, we're gonna spend some time in God's word this morning. I'm gonna pray and then we'll

dive right in.

Jesus, you love your church. You established your church. You are building your church, and you're building it and you're establishing it and you're placing it oftentimes in places that are on the very frontiers of the enemy. And we are making inroads into enemy territory and And this can be dangerous, this can be concerning, this can be fraught with anxiousness. We know perhaps in this group many people who are serving in those places, but, but just as you give them boldness, we pray that you would give us boldness as well to not be ruled by fear and, and to, and to faithfully step into the next things that you have called us to without being alarmist without being paranoid.

You call us to live in the places that you've established us and be your faithful salt and light witnesses here. So help us do the next right thing as we open the Scriptures. Help us trust and follow you. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So as we've gone through this series, we've gone back and forth again and again to what Jesus has intended for the church to be— basically his hands and feet bringing others to to him. And as we step into challenging times— we're in election season. Election season is always nerve-wracking for a lot of people for a lot of reasons. We're in, we're in an uncertain time even right now. But in those uncertain times, challenging times, the light of the church has the opportunity to, to shine more brightly and others be drawn to Jesus.

Now, why do I believe this? Because of what I read in the scriptures. We're going to read in chapter 8 of Acts about some persecution, but before we get there, I want to give us a little, little background. The early church, it's a fledgling church. There's just a— it started, they're basically centered around Jerusalem where a lot of ministry— Jesus was crucified there, Jesus rose there, and that's where the church has really huddled for a while.

One of the leaders there a man named Stephen, incredibly gifted, anointed by God, has, has used that, that his place and presence there to be a beautiful witness for Jesus, to preach and teach publicly. He's drawn the attention of people who do not like what he is preaching and teaching about, and, and, and eventually that preaching and teaching leads to a, um, a violent encounter where he is stoned to death. That's the, the background of where we're beginning. So now we're in Acts chapter 8, verses 1 through 4, and, and the, the writer of the book of Acts, uh, we believe that author is Luke because that's what he says. Luke says, and Saul approved of their killing him.

Now this Saul that we're talking about, let's just do some instruction, let's just do some teaching here. This Saul that we're talking about is not King Saul back in David's time. This is a new

Saul. There were a lot of Sauls. This is a new Saul.

Saul is a very zealous Jew. He loves the Bible. He loves the laws of God. And he's doing his darndest— can I say darndest in church? That's what he's doing.

He's doing his darndest to make sure that no one blasphemes against God's law. He is zealous. And when— and Paul— and Saul is right there when they're stoning Stephen. In fact, the scriptures say that Saul holds their cloaks while they're doing it. He approves of all of this.

Now Saul will eventually become known as Paul, who writes all the— all those letters in the Bible. Now Not all of them, but a lot of them. And he will be a zealous evangelist for Jesus. But before that happens, he is currently a zealous persecutor of Christians. So there's Saul.

We'll learn more about him later. But let's continue with Acts chapter 8. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. Stephen's stoning was the catalyst for some terrible stuff to begin happening. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Everyone got out of town. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul, remember, this zealous persecutor of Christians, began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

But look at verse 4: those who scattered preached the word wherever they went. Now we're going to read another passage from, from Acts, but we're going to do a real quick overview of the chapters between. So if you continue to read in chapter 8, you'll, you'll read that one of the followers that got scattered from Jerusalem was a guy named Philip. Philip is also a follower of Jesus, and he leaves Jerusalem and goes to a Samaritan city, and he starts preaching there as well. And at some point, Philip is traveling through a desert area, and he meets along the way an Ethiopian eunuch, an African eunuch, reading the book of Isaiah.

If you know the story, you know that Philip engages with him. They have a conversation about the prophecies of God embedded in the book of Isaiah. And, and in the conversation, Philip is able to baptize this Ethiopian eunuch into faith, into Jesus. The Gentile eunuch is now a follower of Jesus. Then we get to Acts chapter 9, where Saul is still very busy.

He's staying very active, persecuting the church. But on a road that leads to a city called Damascus, Saul encounters Jesus in a bright light in a vision. Now Jesus has been crucified, he was buried, and now he has been resurrected. Saul doesn't believe any of this until he

has this very dramatic encounter with Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, in a blinding light that, that throws him to the ground. He encounters Jesus here.

He does what Jesus tells him to do, and then Saul is baptized and he starts preaching about Jesus too. Then we get to Acts chapter 10 where Peter— remember, he's the big guy, he's the head Fred right now— Peter is all about the Jews coming and fulfilling what God gave them from, from the olden, olden days, the first prophecies coming through Jesus. This is, this is God's plan for the Jews. But God has a bigger plan than just the Jewish people. And Peter receives a vision, a dream, where he sees this sheet come down from heaven with all of these animals, unclean animals.

And, and Peter correctly interprets that vision to, to mean that, ah, the gospel is not just for Jewish people. The gospel is also for everyone else. So he is told to go to see a man named Cornelius. Cornelius is a Roman soldier and he's a Gentile. And so Peter goes to his house, he preaches to Cornelius, he preaches to everyone in his household.

The Holy Spirit descends just like it did in Acts chapter 2. And there's this amazing miraculous occurrence, and the Holy Spirit is there, and Peter realizes, oh my word, it's true! The gospel is for everyone. And Cornelius and his household, all those who heard the preaching of Peter, are baptized as well. Now we're back to Acts chapter 11.

Y'all caught up? So in Acts chapter 11, people are going, they're sharing the gospel, they're sharing it with people they wouldn't otherwise get a chance to share it with because they've been scattered from their familiar place. Now we're in Acts chapter 11, we're in verse 19. Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among the Jews. Kind of like Peter, they didn't know it was for everyone.

However, some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also. Greeks is just the generic word, word for Gentiles. So they began to speak to people who weren't Jewish, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. And the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. And news of this reached the church in Jerusalem.

It goes back to those apostles who were still there, and the apostles send Barnabas to Antioch. If you don't know Barnabas, study Barnabas. Barnabas is an amazing man. If you want to name your child Barnabas, That's a great name to name your kid.

And when Barnabas arrives and sees what the grace of God is doing

there in Antioch, he was so glad, and he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. And then Barnabas goes to Tarsus to look for Saul. And he finds Saul and he brings him back to Antioch. And for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul stayed there at that church in Antioch, and they taught great numbers of people.

And the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. Today, if you call yourself a Christian, that name comes from this moment here where the Holy Spirit is reaching out beyond, far beyond borders and boundaries, all because someone decided they didn't like the church. And what happens? Miraculous things happen. Between Acts 8 and 11, we see how persecution, troubles, difficulties, challenges all serve to spread the ultimate ends of the gospel.

When troubles come, faithful people remained faithful even as they had to moved from their homes, they stayed faithful. Even as circumstances moved them out of the familiar and into the challenging, they stayed faithful. And the result was that the church expanded. It grew in width and it grew in depth because Jesus builds his church through the faithful perseverance of ordinary believers.

Jesus says this in John 15: Remember what I told you. A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. In Matthew 5, he says this: Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And Paul writes in Romans, remember, all things work together for good to those that love God, and that all things includes difficult things.

No one prays for persecution, but there's an opportunity there when it comes, and Jesus said to expect it. I did a quick survey this morning of how many of you expect— have experienced persecution. I'm going to tell you, we do not experience persecution like others do around the world, but we all have people in our lives that are dismissive of our faith, that think we're foolish, that think this is all nuts. And those— that is its own form of persecution, especially if these are people we love. It's gonna be— it's very hard.

But here's what— here's what the Scriptures remind us: persecution can become a catalyst for personal spiritual growth. It catalyzes the spread of the gospel. Moving it beyond our comfort zone into places we would never imagine to be. And it serves to bring deeper unity among believers.

Can we go back to Iran? Despite persecution, Iran's underground house church movement is among the fastest-growing Christian populations anywhere in the globe. You won't hear that on the news. The church is growing by leaps and bounds in one of the most repressive regimes in

the world, in Africa. In Africa, even as it becomes a dangerous region for believers, Africa simultaneously is recording rapid church, church growth and new church plantings in almost every community.

The church is growing even under oppressive And in China, the government forces closures of churches, but believers adapt. They said, we don't need a building. We can meet in someone's living room. We can meet in someone's back office. We can meet anywhere.

Believers have adapted to keep meeting and keep growing. At last count, the underground church alone— that's not counting other Christian believers— but the underground church have counted over 90 million Chinese believers. And in India, local churches are adapting. They're working. They're not stopping just because the government is shutting down and imposing strict religious rules.

They're saying, we're— we can keep meeting, we can keep going. They're putting in some legal safeguards with themselves. They are expanding their grassroots community engagements, community support to maintain a sense of themselves and fellowship together despite the overall Hindu culture being very anti-Christian, very hostile to faith. Now again, no one wants persecution, but here's what happens when God's people remain faithful. Again, we have a deeper reliance on God.

James says, count it all joy, brothers, when you experience troubles of many kinds, because the working and the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Persecution produces perseverance. Philippians tells us that, that when we suffer for the gospel, it aligns us more closely with Jesus and his sufferings, which brings us to the cross. The cross is the ultimate picture of suffering, and yet Jesus commands us to take up our cross and follow him. Why?

Why does Jesus want us to suffer? Because the cross teaches us that suffering is not the end of life. It is the avenue through which we experience resurrection life. This takes us to Jesus.

Stephen didn't look for an escape when he encountered trouble. He didn't try to get out of it. Instead, he looked up and he found victory within it. And this becomes the testimony of the church. When John is writing to the churches in his book of Revelation, he reminds all of us going through struggles, going through hardships, going through persecution, that the path to victory runs over our enemy through the cross.

Revelation 12:11 says this: They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb, the cross, and the word of their testimony, their witness through it. They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Stepping into suffering is where the church discovers its true victory, and understanding this transforms our approach to scary and uncertain times. We do not have to lay awake nights worrying about

what's happening in our lives and other people's lives. We can trust Jesus.

We can pray about it. We can pray over it. And then we can do the next right thing right in front of us. We may not be in China. We may not be in Iran.

We're not in India. But we will be faced with opposition to our faith as we live it out if we are faithful in living it out, Jesus says you will experience some pushback. Are we to worry about it? Are we to lose sleep over it? Is it to drain our energy, sap us of our spiritual strength?

No, we simply remind ourselves, as Philippians does in Philippians chapter 4, do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests, your concerns to God. The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Our hearts, our minds, our hearts guarded in Christ Jesus. Jesus himself says this: I've told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble.

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, take heart, I've overcome the world. Which brings us back to this verse right here, the one that we've hit time and time and time again through this series. I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. There are risks and dangers, toils and snares, as the old hymn says.

But the interesting paradox is this. You know what a paradox is? It's an unlikely outcome given the circumstances. The paradox is this: troubles, trials, toils, snares have all repeatedly served as growth engines for the church. So instead of anxiously worrying about you— what you cannot control, what you read on the news, and all those who seek to stir you up with anxiety and fear, What we can do instead of that is to remain steadfast.

God builds his church through faithful people. Trust God's plan. God knows what he's doing. And see troubles and concerns and anxious things as opportunities to be a witness, just like Stephen was. We're going to share in a time of communion now, and when we share in communion, I am reminded very often that it's not just you and I who are sharing in this moment in this room.

All over the world this morning, believers are sharing in this moment where they share a cup and they share bread, and in so doing, they are reminded of Jesus' love for us. Some of the people who are meeting this morning, sharing in this moment far from us, are meeting in glorious cathedrals— stained glass windows, pipe organs, beautiful choirs, amazing, amazing places. But others are sharing this moment in

small and secret rooms. But wherever the moment is shared, we're together remembering Jesus. Isaiah 53 says this: Jesus was despised and rejected by men.

He was a man of sorrow. He was acquainted with grief. But surely he has borne our griefs, and he's carried our sorrows. So this morning, as you take the bread and the cup, we are reminded that Jesus did not try to bypass pain, but he entered into it. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we sit and speak this morning from a great place of privilege. We stand without worry that something we say or do may land us in trouble. Sharing communion this morning is probably not going to cost us our job or our marriage or our family, but nonetheless, you said we would have troubles. Wherever those are and whatever those are, you remind us to be faithful through them. Who knows but that persecution will come in a very real way to us at some point, but until that day And in that day, we commit to being faithful to you, to taking our daily step of faith and obedience, trusting your plan and knowing that you're working all things together for good to those that love you.

Jesus, build your church, expand your church, use our witness to build your kingdom. In Jesus' name, amen.

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