

THE BIG IDEA: The comfortable will never conquer.

The Take-Off

I had spent quite a bit of time getting this next message prepared when I saw the same news on Friday that many of you did: a madman had inexplicably killed his mother, driven to where she worked and killed 26 others, including 20 children - mostly 5 year old kindergarten students.

I sat shocked and openly wept at the thought of what those students had seen and felt

I tried to process what I was thinking and tried to get some handle on what I should do with the rage I felt towards a man who by then was reportedly dead

I wondered if I should just chunk the message I had prepared and redo it all, and then I realized how perfectly this tragedy can help us understand what the early church was facing in Acts chapter 8.

So I'd like to walk us through - verse by verse - the first 8 verses of this chapter and stop from time to time to unpack what we're reading and also point out how it intersects with what our country is facing right now.

If I do an adequate job, all of us will leave being more convinced that God's word is - as the author of Hebrews wrote - living and active and able to speak more directly and relevantly into our lives than we'd probably like.

1. Verse 1

"Saul was there, giving approval to his death"

- by all accounts, Saul was a deeply religious man (Phil. 3:4-6 - one word self-summary? "Faultless")
- And yet here, even in his religion, we see a monster
- What type of man not only watches a stoning, but says it's okay
- Sounds a lot like questions many asked Friday as they watched the news unfold
- "How can a man do this?"
- "What kind of world do we live in?"
- We live in a world filled with men who have willingly turned their hearts away from a saving and redeeming God

"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church"

- Do you know why? Because the church - even in it's early days - was choosing comfort over conquering
- And who can blame them?
- They saw Stephen step out and obey the command Jesus had given about being his witnesses and had seen him killed violently, and they saw a monster nodding his approval and they understandably pulled their kids in a little closer and shut the doors.
- They did what we're tempted to do today.
- More than one expectant couple felt fear over bringing a child into a world that revealed its savagery in CT
- More than one parent felt rage and other unmentionable emotions over what a man could do to children

- So, let's take a minute or two to unpack the emotions that many of us are dealing with
- Perhaps this will be too honest for many of you to embrace, but I kept thinking about what I would do to anybody who did that to my children
- Sydney is the age of the oldest children in Sandy Hook Elementary School and it wasn't hard to imagine her there
- As I heard the reports, I kept imagining what I would want to do to that man - it was vicious, bloody and extremely "unChristian"
- But here's the reality: **There are no Christian emotions, only human ones. There are, however, Christian responses to those human emotions.**
- That's the real issue, isn't it? Not that we don't feel the same things that unbelievers may feel, but that we don't act or respond the same way unbelievers will

2. Verse 2

"Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply"

- Never forget this: Being a follower of Jesus doesn't exempt us from the pains of being human.
- Godly people bury people they love and mourn people they love
- You can't love Jesus enough to get out of that
- It isn't a sign of sin, or a lack of faith, or anything else. It's a sign of being alive.

- So mourn, and mourn deeply. These godly men did, and without apology.
- In fact, the Mishnah (the first written collection of the written Torah and the oral commentary about the Torah) allowed Jewish men to bury and mourn, but not with great lamentation.
- But these men did. So grieve, and grieve with hope according to 1 Thess. 4:13, but grieve with tears and wailing and ugly crying.
- Being Christian doesn't mean we stifle grief. It means we sanctify it by recognizing it isn't greater than our Lord's power to comfort us.

3. Verse 3

"But Saul began to destroy the church"

- This is the specific information generally referred to in verse 1 as the "great persecution"
- Saul was responsible for most of this, and the word here for "destroy" has in mind the tearing of a body by an animal.
- And notice when this was happening: right after the burying and the grieving. There was no time to come up for air, not chance to catch their breath.
- While it was raining, it started to pour, and again, it was happening to GODLY men.

"Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women"

- Please get how bad this is...
- He went house to house
- He dragged off - this was no polite reading of the rights
- The word for dragged is the same word that describes how Satan swept a third of the angels from heaven
- It is a dark, demonic action that was perpetrated on men AND WOMEN
- It was so bad, so violent, that later in his writings (when he was Paul) he made many references to these acts and once even said that it was the reason he wasn't qualified to be an apostle (1 Cor. 15:9).
- Some scholars think that Saul's response was so violent because he was so conflicted over the truth of Stephen's statements in chapter 7
- Sometimes those who react the most violently against the truth are in fact the ones most tormented by it.
- It is not our job to picket them, but to pray for them. (Matthew 5:44)

4. Verse 4

"Those who had been scattered"

- How were they scattered? Through the persecution
- Why was that necessary? Because no one would choose to go into the world where Saul had a free reign of terror
- There is only One who did, and his name is Jesus
- Philippians 2 says that he willingly chose to enter a world that would hate him and kill him
- We ask where is God in tragic times, and the message of the cross screams loudly that He is in the middle of it.
- The hope of the gospel is that we have been saved from the paralyzing label of "victim"
- The message of the gospel is that Jesus is at once both the victim of and the victor over the injustices of humanity.
- And the Savior who would overcome the greatest of injustices spoke to his followers in John 20:21 and told them they would need his peace, because he was sending them into the world as he was sent into the world
- At this point we find ourselves pushing back against that command because we fear the world he sends us into
- And that is why the great persecution broke out against the church. It was to force them to do what they would never have chosen to do.
- The Christian life isn't made up of simple choices as much as submitted choices.
- We think that given enough information we will make the choice to tithe, to read the Bible, to witness
- But we have all the information we need and we still don't do it. Why not?
- Because it isn't a simple choice. It's a spiritual act of submission to the will and command of our Savior.
- "As the father has sent me, I am sending you."
- It's just that sometimes he sends us with a tack in the chair, because he knows that **THE COMFORTABLE WILL NEVER CONQUER.**
- That's why you don't see a lot of cactus couches - no one would ever be able to get comfortable

- We're called to change a culture that is radically opposed to the Lordship of Jesus, and not many of us will feel like entering the danger zone to do that. We get saved, we get comfortable. Even if we wanted to reach the lost, we fear for our safety and just like the early church, we pull back.
- And that's when God kicks us from the nest. He scattered the early church, and He still scatters today.

"Preached the word wherever they went"

- They preached wherever they went! Did you catch that?
- What they did never changed. Where they did it changed constantly!
- Many of us are waiting to be in the right place at the right time in order to speak the right message. You're already there. Just preach.
- And it wasn't the apostles, and it wasn't on Sundays. It was whenever and wherever the people found themselves.
- According to verse 1, the apostles were back in Jerusalem. None of the scholars are really sure why, but let's just draw this conclusion from the fact that the rest of the people were out preaching anywhere they were: We're not exempt from preaching the gospel just because we don't belong to an elite group.
- The evangelism of the world is not the weekly work of a few men of God, but the daily work of the people of God.
- Wherever they went. Where are you?
- They preached the word. Are you?

The Landing

What do we take away from these 4 verses?

- We are the children of God saved by the Son of God sent out to preach the word of God.
- How we got where we are isn't nearly as important as what we'll do for Jesus where we are.
- It's okay to feel deeply the emotions common to man as long as we remember that we have a hope that isn't common to man.

We are called to be conquerors, and if we pull back - even in times of sadness and fear and danger - we will grow comfortable, and our Big Idea for today shouts at us the warning that **THE COMFORTABLE WILL NEVER CONQUER.** So the kick in the pants, the tack in the chair, the cactus couch are all blessings because they will result in each of us going to do what we would never have chosen to do on our own:

Seeking and saving the lost.

Let's pray.